

PLAYING WITH POWER:  
Subjectivity and Subversion in the Poems of Emily Dickinson  
by  
Madeline Rombes



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For my Dad



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## Abstract

The poetry of the prolific nineteenth-century writer Emily Dickinson is often credited for its experimental form and rhyme schemes and its constant challenges to the definition of poetics. Dickinson created a narrating persona who is acutely aware of the limitations of her society but who imagines possible routes of escape and evasion from these patriarchal constraints – she essentially creates an abstract world in which she is the sole seer. Dickinson lived in a time guided by patriarchal belief systems; New England Calvinism and traditional marital roles were visible aspects of the poet's daily life. This thesis exposes the ways in which Dickinson's conceptions of male figures, who are sometimes unnamed and who sometimes are characterized as God, husband, Death, or "Master," are complicated and intertwined. It attempts to present Dickinson's complex views towards both religion and marriage, how she links these two institutions in her poetry, and how the subjectivity of her narrator or "supposed person" claims power over these patriarchal institutions through masochism and narrative positioning.

Although most of this analysis is guided by close readings of unique poems, there are a couple of theoretical platforms that provide essential jumping-off points. For one, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* and Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* ground a definition of masochism. The analysis is also indebted to critics such as Margaret Homans and Susan Howe who have provided a starting point for theories of what Dickinson's treatment of femininity and masculinity means for feminism.

The first chapter looks at samples of Dickinson's early letters to provide historical context for the poet's experience with religion, examining her viewpoints on Christianity. The second chapter uses close readings of several poems that reveal the poet's complicated relationship with religion and spirituality, and argues that she uses her authority as poet to control religious/masculine figures in an attempt to subvert their power. The third chapter provides historical context on the poet's viewpoints on marriage, and analyzes several poems that reveal Dickinson's distrust of the institution of marriage. The fourth and final chapter focuses on Dickinson's "Master" letters and argues that the poet places herself in a position of seeming powerlessness, presented as masochism, in order to claim control over the masculine Other in her poetry.

*Keywords:* Poetry, Emily Dickinson, Nineteenth-Century American Lit, Romanticism, Feminism



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## INTRODUCTION

“Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” Emily Dickinson wrote this to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862 at the age of thirty-two (*Letters* 2: 403<sup>1</sup>). The poet surely knew the answer, for she had been writing with confidence already for fifteen years. Though now widely praised, her poetry was only sparingly published during her life; Samuel Bowles, her friend and one of many correspondents, published a few of her poems in his newspaper but they were edited so as to eliminate her strange punctuation and rhyme schemes. It wasn’t until the publication of Thomas H. Johnson’s 1955 collection that her work appeared in its most full and original form.<sup>2</sup> Yet Dickinson’s correspondents often missed that her “Verse” was not merely alive, but jumped off the page with stunning truthfulness, reinventing the world that she solitarily observed as something belonging to her. A few months later she wrote to Higginson again: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (*Letters* 2: 412). The role of this “supposed person” is the key to her elusive poetry, for such subjectivity allows the poet to place herself in a position of authorial control.

Dickinson did not lead a traditional life. She did not marry, which was unusual for an American woman in the nineteenth century. Dickinson wanted to be anything but a mirror image of her mother or of most other women in her society; she did not want to be confined by household duties expected of women, and more importantly she did not want a man hindering her creative life. The poet spent much of her time in her bedroom, reluctant by the end of her life

<sup>1</sup> Letters refers to Thomas H. Johnson’s *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

<sup>2</sup> Though this was indeed a seminal publication, Ralph W. Franklin has since pointed out some of the collection’s major flaws. Scholars today generally consider Franklin’s collection to be the most definitive, and it is thus the edition used for this thesis.

to even greet guests, and she wrote more than 1000 letters and at least 1800 poems, the breadth of which was not discovered until after her death.

Emily Dickinson's poems often reflect her concern with independence, and she employs various methods to destabilize patriarchal institutions, particularly those of religion and marriage. Dickinson's treatment of masculinity within her poetry is complex and often contradictory. Her poetic world is flooded with nameless, masculine characters with the faces of God, Death, Master, or other archetypal figures, and these characters are often large or powerful and often control or claim dominance over the feminine subject.<sup>3</sup> As Joanne Dobson puts it in “‘Oh, Susie, it is dangerous’: Emily Dickinson and the Archetype,” “a particularly intense constellation of images, situations, and statement in [Dickinson’s] poetry reveals an intriguing preoccupation with masculinity, and, more particularly, with a facet of masculinity that is perceived as simultaneously omnipotent, fascinating, and deadly” (80). Interestingly, Dickinson seemed to be ambivalent about these powerful figures. For though she was fascinated and preoccupied by explorations of masculinity, her ideas about gender were undoubtedly influenced by the patriarchal society in which she lived; she was often forced to take on masculine perspectives dictated to her by society and many aspects of her daily life were inundated with patriarchal systems of belief. The poet demonstrates contradictory viewpoints on masculinity, but by looking at these frequently written-about masculine Others – figures to whom the poet’s “supposed person” is often submissive – this thesis begins to determine the ways in which Dickinson used this supposed self to claim power over her counterparts.

Many Dickinson critics have explored the various ways she refuses to comply with gender norms of her era. Suzanne Juhasz paints Dickinson as a tease, arguing that she fights

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that although the gender of Dickinson’s speaker is often suggested to be feminine, it is sometimes left ambiguous, and occasionally even leans towards the masculine.

against the confines of patriarchal society by writing about unladylike subjects such as death and sexual love. Barbara Mossberg posits that Dickinson ironically exaggerates gender roles ascribed to her. Martha Nell Smith argues that comic art is Dickinson's method of deconstructing cultural authority, whereas Christianne Miller maintains that she creates humorous effects using linguistic excess in poems on serious issues of the human condition. Margaret Homans points out that Dickinson was able, more so than other women writers of her time, to recognize the fictiveness of concepts and language and thereby subvert norms by reworking linguistic rules.

This thesis utilizes the groundwork many of these critics have put in place, but it furthers their discussions by showing precisely how the poet uses a unique subjectivity in order to claim power over figures with symbolic power, thereby subtly undermining institutions with patriarchal groundings. The first chapter provides an essential background to Dickinson's experience with religion by examining both historical context and samples from her early letters, using them to posit that satire is one of her methods of subversion. The second chapter consists of close readings of several poems that show how Dickinson uses her authorial control to overtake religious figures in poems, allowing her to claim subjectivity, subvert the masculine dominance inherent in religion, and reject the institution of religion. The third chapter first provides biographical context for the poet's experience with and treatment of marriage, and then analyzes some poems that poke fun of marriage as an institution, revealing Dickinson's views that marriage implies loss of individuality and selfhood for the wife. The fourth and final chapter discusses Dickinson's use of masochism in her poetry and "Master" letters, arguing that by placing herself in a position of seeming powerlessness, Dickinson actually claims control over the subjects of her poetry. Broadly speaking, this thesis exposes the inner workings of Emily Dickinson's ambivalent views towards both religion and marriage, how she links the two

institutions in her poetry, and how the subjectivity of her narrator claims authority through voice and narrative positioning.

*I.**Not to “give up the world”: Dickinson’s Roots*

Emily Dickinson, born in 1830, lived in a time and place that regarded Christianity as an essential part of daily life. Mid nineteenth-century New England was experiencing a revival of Protestant belief systems, and her family, though not much more religious than other families in Amherst, Massachusetts, raised her and her siblings in the Calvinist faith.<sup>4</sup> The Dickinson family attended the town’s First Congregational Church and Dickinson studied the Bible diligently, but upon beginning her formal education she began to stray from these rigid and traditional systems of belief. This chapter focuses on Dickinson’s early letters to provide a biographical overview of her experience with religion.

Dickinson began attending the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847. Eager to attend the school that was founded only ten years earlier, she found success in the one year she was there, making friends and achieving academically. An early letter to her brother Austin in October 1847 reveals that her wit and cheer were in full force:

The cake, gingerbread, pie, & peaches are all devoured, but the – apples –  
chestnuts & grapes still remain & will I hope for some time. You may laugh if  
you want to, in view of the little time in which so many of the good things have  
disappeared [sic] but you must recollect that there are *two* instead of *one* to be  
fed & we have keen appetites over here. (*Letters* 1: 48)

The “two” she refers to in this letter include herself and her roommate, who was also her cousin. This letter indicates her contentedness at the school; the poet seems to be unconcerned with

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<sup>4</sup> Calvinism emphasized predestination and was guided by the Five Points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. The Articles of Faith of the Dickinsons’ church can be found online at [digitalamherst.org](http://digitalamherst.org).

schoolwork and with the stresses of having a new home, instead writing about this comically trivial issue of snacks. But only two weeks later, she seems to have a different attitude. She writes to her friend Abiah Root of her homesickness:

But I am now contented & quite happy, if I can be happy when absent from my dear home & friends. You may laugh at the idea, that I cannot be happy when away from home, but you must remember that I have a very dear home & that this is my first trial in the way of absence for any length of time in my life. (*Letters* 1: 53)

Later in this letter, Dickinson details each day's order of events, beginning with study hour and devotions, history recitations, and a recitation of Pope's *An Essay on Man*, singing, piano practice, and accounts for the day, "including, Absence – Tardiness – Communications ... & ten thousand other things, which I will not take time or place to mention." After, they "receive advice from Miss. Lyon in the form of a lecture" (*Letters* 1: 54-55). Evidently the rigidness of her school, and especially its strong religious emphases, began to wear the poet out.

Dickinson refers to a "Miss Lyon" in many of her Holyoke letters. This instructor is the founder of the college, Mary Lyon. Lyon was a hard-working educator who found great beauty in the Bible and in the Christian faith, and in her biography of Dickinson, Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes, "The influence of Mary Lyon was more subtle (and perhaps more insidious) than haranguing. When she spoke to the students in the morning exercises, her address was often a kind of 'sermon'" (Wolff 99). Religious influence at Holyoke was not oppressive, but it was

probably overwhelming for Dickinson. Just by attending the college she was passively pressured into being, or acting like, a good Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Dickinson's homesickness eventually took over and she returned to her home in August 1848, ending her formal education. But three months before her final departure, a letter to Abiah Root (Dickinson's last from Holyoke) revealed that Mary Lyon's tireless religious guidance had not succeeded:

I tremble when I think how soon the weeks and days of this term will all have been spent, and my fate will be sealed, perhaps ... Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all-important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. (*Letters* 1: 67)

This heartbreak letter marks Dickinson's first personal religious crisis. New England was going through a series of religious revivals at this time, and it was an expectation for members of the church to declare their faith in front of the congregation.<sup>6</sup> In *All Things Dickinson: An*

<sup>5</sup> However, as Sharon Leiter notes in *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*, "Coming under the sway of this remarkable woman, there was much that Emily Dickinson might have found inspiring in [Lyon]: her hatred of 'empty gentility,' ... her injunction never to 'write a foolish thing in a letter or elsewhere': 'what is written is written' – a sentiment that resonated with Dickinson's own belief that 'A Word dropped careless on a Page' can exert either a destructive or positive influence that is long-lasting" (Leiter 350-1). There is no evidence that Lyon was any sort of idol for Dickinson, but it is important not to reduce the teacher to simply a hard, religious woman.

<sup>6</sup> From the church's Articles of Faith: "No person is to be admitted a member of this Church, without the unanimous approval of the Church meeting, nor without publicly assenting, on the Sabbath before the Congregation, to the Articles of Faith and Covenant." (*The Articles of Faith and Government*, 7).

*Encyclopedia of Emily Dickinson's World*, Wendy Martin writes that through Dickinson's youth and young adulthood there were "seven more revivals in which many citizens of Amherst, including Lavinia and Edward Dickinson, made public declarations that they had been 'saved' by God: Emily Dickinson was urged by her family and friends to submit to the same spiritual process, but she adamantly resisted" (Martin xxv). It seems that autonomy is what Dickinson strove for at this developmental time in her life, and perhaps she found that the lessons at Holyoke contradicted themselves: encouraging young women to find independence while persuading them to dedicate their lives to God and "give up the world."

A later letter shows that this same type of contradiction was happening at home as well: "[My father] buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their 'Father'" (*Letters* 2: 404). Her father, a smart man, encouraged his family to educate themselves,<sup>7</sup> but only to the extent that they maintain the family's morals and beliefs – Edward Dickinson bought a Bible for his daughter at the age of thirteen.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Dickinson refers to God as "an Eclipse" in this letter. An eclipse is something that shrouds, that hinders and creates blockage, and that she perceived God in that manner suggests a fear or distrust of Him. Both "fathers" are addressed in this letter, neither of whom she seems to understand or trust, and she employs a satiric tone in order to cope with her isolated position as the only one who cannot follow this "Father."

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<sup>7</sup> However, Edward Dickinson was biased toward his son Austin – he would "[read] his son's letters aloud to anyone who would listen and [praise] every line of them without reservation" (Wolff 130). This bias was part of Edward's patriarchal impulse to preserve the "House of Dickinson," which only Austin, as man who would pass on his name to children, could maintain.

<sup>8</sup> A full photocopied version of the poet's personal King James Bible is available on the Harvard University Library website.

In the years following Dickinson's premature departure from the college, she continued to become disillusioned with religion. Wolff references a letter addressed to Emily and Austin from their sister Lavinia (Vinnie), who wrote: “Do become a Christian *now*. How beautiful, if *we three* could all believe in Christ.... Does Emilie [sic] think of these things at all?”” (qtd. in Wolff 102), and another letter from Dickinson’s friend Emily Fowler which has similar religious encouragements. Even after leaving seminary, Dickinson was bombarded by this type of talk all around Amherst, which prompted another crisis for her: a further alienation from the church. In an 1850 letter to her friend Jane Humphrey, she writes:

How lonely this world is growing, something so desolate creeps over the spirit  
 and we dont [sic] know it's [sic] name, and it wont [sic] go away, either Heaven is  
 seeming greater, or Earth a great deal more small, or God is more “Our Father,”  
 and we feel our need increased. Christ is calling everyone here, all my  
 companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts  
 him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. (*Letters* 1:  
 94)

Again, Dickinson paints God as this Other who she cannot understand, and she is clearly skeptical about this religion to which everyone seems to be answering. Dickinson, whose dedication to the truth (as seen in her honest, questioning poetry), simply could not trust this “Father,” and as in the previous letter, she satirizes Christianity, noting that “our need” is increased as Heaven begins to seem greater, and Earth smaller. Dickinson is aware at this time that her disbelief in God appears to a “rebellion,” though this is not how she frames it. Faith is something she just could not understand, could not comply with, and because of the

overwhelming inundation of religion in Amherst at the time, her inability to believe made it an increasingly lonely place.

Later in the same letter, she writes of being envious of believers:

I wait for the bell to ring, and at evening a great deal stranger, the “still small voice” grows earnest and rings, and returns, and lingers, and the faces of good men shine, and bright halos come around them; and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed. It *certainly* comes from God – and I think to receive it is blessed – not that I know it from *me*, but from those on whom *change* has passed. They seem so very tranquil, and their voices are kind, and gentle, and the tears fill their eyes so often, I really think I envy them. (*Letters* 1: 94)

Again, Dickinson uses satire to paint believers of God in a ridiculous light – literally, with “bright halos” that “come around them.” But this letter, more than the others, reads as a genuine desire to be part of this crowd. She would be happy to be blissfully ignorant in blind faith but she is unable to do so. Her attachment to Truth disallows her from receiving this enlightened state from God – she simply cannot believe in what she cannot see. Dickinson tried religion; she saw how it affected those around her and wished to be a part of it. Through her childhood and in her year at Holyoke she was not opposed to the idea of faith, so her final refusal of it is not a youthful and blind rebellion, but a conscious and deliberate dismissal of the Christian church. Almost every person she knew was religious, but Dickinson simply could not accept the loss of selfhood that accompanied following Christ. Thus, 1850 marks the year that Dickinson rejected religion, and she retained this attitude her whole life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, 1850 is also the year she wrote the first poem we have on record. Perhaps her rejection of religion allowed the poet to liberate her creativity.

Yet her poems demonstrate that she did not *ignore* religion – in fact, she used writing as a method of reconciling her beliefs. One cannot say for sure what exactly she believed, but surely she thought a lot about God and struggled with her own faith and doubt. In ““Is Immortality True?” Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals,” Jane Donahue Eberwein notes that the Civil War, as well as growing diversity and mobility in New England, began to upheave the region’s religious unity. Thus Dickinson witnessed a great deal of religious change in her lifetime: “in her childhood, faith seemed all but inevitable; by the time she died in 1886, agnosticism and atheism had become easier positions to justify intellectually” (Eberwein 69). Dickinson could not escape the influence of religion, even with her refusal to join the church.

The poet’s dismissal of the Christian faith as she understood it was not as simple as walking away. Many of her poems deal with religion, with God, with faith, Eternal life, and Heaven. Part of this is because of how much of her life was influenced by religion – she could not escape it even in her own home. But Dickinson also had a general fascination with faith: a poetic interest in it. The idea of Eternity is especially present in her work. It seems as though she was trying her whole life to become one among the faithful, to be presented with a glowing halo, but her practical mind obstructed her from attaining such a state.

*II.*

*“I gave Myself to Him”: Religion and Masculinity in Dickinson’s Poetry*

Emily Dickinson began studying the Bible at the age of thirteen, and continued to do so throughout her life. From the Bible she learned to both fear and love a male God, and was guided to believe that she, as a woman, was a lesser being. According to the Bible, women were made in man’s image, and men were made in God’s image, so it is not surprising that Dickinson had contradictory perspectives on male figures. The previous chapter explored Emily Dickinson’s ambivalent position on religion, and this chapter uses her poetry to reveal how patriarchal belief systems shaped her idea of religion. Furthermore, it exposes the intertwinedness of Christianity and masculinity in Dickinson’s poetry, and begins to unpack her complex treatments of these two things.

Dickinson’s poems often tell the story of a narrator having some sort of experience with another person or figure, who is often conceived as masculine. This thesis examines many specific poems that deal with different types of the masculine Other. An 1862 poem contains an excellent example of an Other that is unidentified, which begins:

He showed me Hights [sic] I never saw -

“Would’st Climb” - He said?

I said, “Not so” -

“With me -” He said - “With me”? (*Poems* 156<sup>10</sup>)

It does not become clear through this poem who exactly this “He” is. However, Dickinson utilizes varying levels of determination among poems; sometimes it is not difficult to deduce the nature of the Other’s identity, sometimes we must choose between several alternatives, and

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<sup>10</sup> *Poems* refers to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by R. W. Franklin.

sometimes the figure's identity is not revealed in the slightest. Thus it is not essential to reveal his identity at all times because the common denominator – masculinity – is his most essential aspect. Joanne Dobson notes that "It is in these poems of the indeterminate 'He' that the pure energy of the *idea* of the masculine is most clearly observed, where we can see her fascination and her fear in their essence, without the distractions of biographical particularities" (81). Dickinson's conceptions of men/masculinity which come from distinct areas of her life are mixed together in her poetry, and it begins not to matter what sort of identity defines this masculine Other.

God sometimes appears as a lover, as in the 1863 poem "God is a distant - stately Lover -" which describes "Verily, a Vicarious Courtship -" (*Poems* 276). God-like characters are often embodied by men, as well. "A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -" is a poem which confuses husband/man with God and/or Death, as becomes clear in the last few lines:

Softly - my Future climbs the Stair -  
 I fumble at my Childhood's Prayer -  
 So soon to be a Child - no more -  
 Eternity - I'm coming - Sir -  
 Master - I've seen the Face - before - (*Poems* 90)

Although this poem is framed as the night before the speaker's marriage, it can be interpreted to fit either of these three distinct experiences: marriage, becoming a follower of God, and death. The Other in this poem, characterized as "my Future," could be the soon-to-be husband, God, or Death. The speaker fumbles – nervously? – at her "Childhood's Prayer," i.e. the Lord's Prayer, which could be spoken at a marriage, during worship, and/or before death. That the speaker will soon no longer be a "Child" implies a thrust into adulthood: a loss of virginity in marriage; the

growing-up that accompanies Holy Communion; or the end of childhood/life upon death. All these experiences are irrevocable, which the speaker proves to be aware of when she mentions “Eternity.” The last two lines reiterate the ambiguity of this masculine figure; “Sir” and “Master” are the same terms used in the “Master” letters, and are notable Dickinson tropes that refer to an indeterminate person.

Religion was a major aspect of Dickinson’s early life, and scholars have often been impressed by the numerous biblical references in her letters and poems. Though the poet had serious doubts from a young age about her Calvinist upbringing, there is no doubt about her mastery of the Bible as a text. An excellent example of this mastery is “Forever at His side to walk -,” a poem which also challenges notions of both Christianity and marriage:

Forever at His side to walk -

The smaller of the two!

Brain of His Brain -

Blood of His Blood -

Two lives - One Being - now -

Forever of His fate to taste -

If grief - the largest part -

If joy - to put my piece away

For that beloved Heart -

All life - to know each other

Whom we can never learn -

And bye and bye - a Change -

Called Heaven -

Rapt neighborhoods of men -

Just finding out - what puzzled us -

Without the lexicon! (*Poems* 118)

The man in this poem is probably a husband figure, for the piece narrates the bondage of husband and wife and how marriage leads both man and woman toward Heaven. The poem subverts biblical notions by rewriting the text itself: chapter two of Genesis reads, “And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 2.22-24). The first stanza of “Forever at His side to walk -” is a clear reference to this verse. The wording of the lines “Brain of His Brain - / Blood of His Blood -” follows Genesis almost precisely, and “Two lives - One Being - now -” references the corporeal binding of Adam and Eve. Just as Eve was created from Adam’s rib, the narrator in this poem is a part of her husband; her life is erased and incorporated into his.

Ephesians also tells us that a husband’s love for his wife is narcissistic: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones (Eph. 5.28-30). According to this passage, men inherently love themselves, but they should treat their wives as part of themselves, so that they may love women too. Important to notice, however, is Dickinson’s use of “brain” and “blood” instead of “bones” and “flesh” from the Bible. Blood is of the body, yes – but the brain

is both *of* the body and intellectually *outside* the body. Even the wife's brain is incorporated into that of the husband, for not only does her body belong to him, but so does her mind. Dickinson is making sure her readers understand that in marriage, the wife's intellectual interests are diminished or demolished by those of the husband.

The second stanza interestingly contains eating as an element of marriage, and we can easily compare this to Christian eucharistic rituals. Luke describes the words spoken at the Last Supper, now used by pastors and priests before communion: "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22.19). For Dickinson, a Calvinist-raised New Englander, the bread and wine signified but did not consist of the flesh and blood of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Dickinson applies this metaphoric eating in "Forever at His side to walk -". The narrator must taste/eat her husband's fate ("Forever of His fate to taste") – if he is ill-fated, she will take responsibility for it, but if his life turns out well, she will let him be happy and take away nothing ("If grief - the largest part - / If joy - to put my piece away"). In communion, the subject consumes the bread and wine so that he or she may remember and embody the suffering of Christ, and in the same way, the wife's body absorbs her partner's suffering in this poem; she sacrifices her body for him.

Though the male figure in this poem is likely a husband, he is portrayed in a way that makes him seem godly. The Bible, too, often compares men to Christ, as in Ephesians: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body" (Eph. 5. 22-23).

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<sup>11</sup> According to John Calvin, "The sum is, that the flesh and blood of Christ feed our souls just as bread and wine maintain and support our corporeal life. [ ... ] I hold ... that the sacred mystery of the Supper consists of two things – the corporeal signs, which, presented to the eye, represent invisible things in a manner adapted to our weak capacity, and the spiritual truth, which is at once figured and exhibited by the signs" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book four, chapter 17, points 10-11).

This Christian line of authority is made clear throughout the Bible: just as woman was created from the bones of man, man was created in the image of God; women must serve men, and humanity must serve God. A godly woman must be subservient, and through marriage both man and woman can reach Heaven. In *The Revenge of Cato's Daughter: Dickinson's Masochism*, Marianne Noble writes, "In Heaven, Christian souls, like brides, experience the empowerment and pleasure of union by renouncing all of their particular concerns" (34). The last stanza of the poem reveals that after a godly marriage, in which wife serves husband, death is almost nothing because of the ease with which the holy partners will ascend: "And bye and bye - a Change - / Called Heaven" (264. 12-13).

One difference between this poem and Genesis is that the speaker is talking about the man/husband figure, whereas in the Bible, both the narrator and Adam are talking about Eve. Herein lies an important power play. Dickinson could have written this poem from the perspective of the male, or from a third-person perspective, both of which are used in the verse from Genesis. But like most of her poems, the speaker's existence in "Forever at His side to walk" is meager on a linguistic level. The speaker barely references herself; she uses "my" and "we" sparingly but says "He" many times. This aspect of the poem is important because, regardless of what the poem actually portrays as happening, Dickinson maintains her authorial control over it. She maintains, furthermore, a certain distance between herself and the narrator of the poem, ensuring that Dickinson the poet has the final authorial word.

Another poem that confuses marriage and Christian faith, but that also speaks in the first person is "I gave Myself to Him":

I gave Myself to Him -  
And took Himself, for Pay -

The solemn contract of a Life

Was ratified, this way -

The Wealth might disappoint -

Myself a poorer prove

Than this great Purchaser suspect,

The Daily Own - of Love

Depreciate the Vision -

But till the Merchant buy -

Still Fable - in the Isles of spice -

The subtle Cargoes - lie -

At least - 'tis Mutual - Risk -

Some - found it - Mutual Gain -

Sweet Debt of Life - Each Night to owe -

Insolvent - every Noon - (*Poems* 197)

This seems to be another poem about nineteenth-century marital tradition – a woman giving up her life to her husband. Because of the requirement for women to marry, she gave her life, body, and labor up as payment, and he took but did not give. She is concerned that unbeknownst to him, she does not have much wealth, which could be taken literally, or metaphorically to mean knowledge or experience. But at least the risk is mutual, though neither of them will benefit, for the “Debt” she owes every night – sexual intercourse – will not be fulfilled.

But another reading of this poem uses the lens of religion to show how Christianity places emphasis on the loss of self. When a person becomes a member of the Christian faith,

their worldly goods and their bodies become the property of God. Romans reads, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service,” and Proverbs; “Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase” (Romans 12.1; Prov. 3.9). So the speaker in the poem could be saying, *I gave myself up to God, but he gave me nothing in return. He may be disappointed by my lack of wealth (faith), for I will surely not be praying every night.*

Unlike that in “Forever at His side to walk -,” the narrator of this poem speaks in first person. Although the distance between author and speaker is smaller here, Dickinson takes similar control. The poem relays the fact that though a “solemn contract” has been signed, either between man and wife or God and subject or both, the speaker will not necessarily comply with every obligation it entails. She will get close, yes – she will give herself to “Him,” but she will infiltrate the system of oppression by refusing to comply with all the contract’s rules. By claiming subjectivity in this poem, the narrator is able to subvert the masculine powers that control her: both husband (patriarchy) and God.

The following poem is a more clear example of how Dickinson blatantly rejected and subverted the power of religion in her poetry:

The Bible is an antique Volume -

Written by faded Men

At the suggestion of Holy Spectres -

Subjects - Bethlehem -

Eden - the ancient Homestead -

Satan - the Brigadier -

Judas - the Great Defaulter -

David - the Troubadour -  
 Sin - a distinguished Precipice  
 Others must resist -  
 Boys that “believe” are very lonesome -  
 Other Boys are “lost” -  
 Had but the Tale a warbling Teller -  
 All the Boys would come -  
 Orpheu’s [sic] Sermon captivated -  
 It did not condemn - (*Poems* 581)

The poet is not suggesting that there is anything inherently bad in believing in God; instead, she rejects the institution of religion by rejecting the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Dickinson encourages her readers to imagine a reformed version of Christianity, with a “warbling Teller” for a leader, like Orpheus, whose “sermons” were melodic and compelling.

Furthermore, it is important that she indicates “Men” as those “faded,” outdated/dead writers of the Bible because it suggests that women were not included in the creation of the dominant religion of her time. The line “Boys that ‘believe’ are very lonesome” further suggests that Christianity is a male-centric religion. As in many of her other poems, Dickinson does not overtly state her issues with the institution. Instead, she points to these issues by occupying the

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<sup>12</sup> Dickinson’s conception of religion in these poems is reminiscent of Transcendentalist values, a movement that was created in response to the state of intellectualism and spiritualism of the time. Closely associated with New England Unitarianism, writers of this movement including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau believed that institutions of religion and politics essentially corrupted the mind, and they instead advocated for “self-reliance” and individual spirituality. Dickinson, though not necessarily a part of this movement, lived in the vicinity of its places of origin and she was familiar with some of these writers’ works, particularly Emerson’s. These poems and others that are reminiscent of the movement may not in fact have any associations with it – she may have coincidentally come to these realizations around the same time as others – but the connections are nonetheless noteworthy.

state of the masses of her time. This poem does not recognize the existence of women, just as the Christianity with which she was familiar did not include women. In “The Big Tease,” a chapter from *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, Suzanne Juhasz argues that “With tease rather than with direct attack, Dickinson questions and negotiates power relationships as they are traditionally structured in terms of hierarchies and dominance” (27). This “comic power” is similar to what was identified in the first chapter of this thesis – Dickinson’s mild subversion of religion in her letters through satire. Similarly, Dickinson’s method of subversion in this poem is to skirt overt rejection of institutional power and leave questions of authority to be answered by her readers.

In these poems, Dickinson utilizes her textual understanding of the Bible to subvert and mock it, repurposing the holy text for her own creative use. It is evident that Dickinson has a thorough understanding and knowledge of the Bible, and the mere fact that she repurposes it is an important aspect of her rejection of religion. Her relationship with Christianity is complicated; she pokes fun of the Bible while also revealing that she has studied it greatly of her own volition, which indicates that she at least has some amount of respect for it. The poet’s life was filled with religious influence – from her family and from her community – so she had to position herself in a unique place that would reveal simultaneously a respect for and a distrust of the Bible. This attitude is exhibited by her poetry. For her to write that “The Bible is an antique Volume” and then to recognize the Bible’s place in relation to poetry (Orpheu’s [sic] Sermon captivated - / It did not condemn -) exhibits Dickinson’s ambivalent attitude towards religion. The Bible was probably a poetic influence for her, for it was the Mighty Text ruling her community and country. She could not escape its reign, and it would prove its power by cropping up in her poetry over and over for Dickinson’s entire poetic career. Perhaps Dickinson is attempting through her

poetry to herself become the “warbling Teller” she references in “The Bible is an antique Volume.” Maybe, as a poet, she hopes to become an ideal orator who, unlike the Bible, “captivates” but does not “condemn.”

### III.

#### *“My Lifetime folding up”: Dickinson and Marriage*

This thesis has already revealed some of the links Dickinson creates between religion, masculinity, and patriarchal systems. It has demonstrated how within her poetry, male figures are used to make larger statements about religion or other patriarchal institutions – one of which is marriage. This chapter furthers the exploration of masculinity and subversion by looking at how Emily Dickinson characterizes marital or otherwise romantic relationships, making links between the male-centric institutions of religion and marriage. As a jumping-off point, biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes an interesting connection between these two institutions:

For the women especially, this Christ Who came to call for them so importunately – offering Himself as the ‘Bridegroom’ of salvation and beseeching them to become ‘brides of Christ’ by accepting faith – could be a compelling Suitor. Some young women seemed transfigured by the love of this wooing. (Wolff 103)

Just as Dickinson rejected the “wooing” of Christ, she never acted on any proposal of marriage, though she may have been asked for her hand at least once.<sup>13</sup> But witnessing her mother’s home-bound lifestyle probably helped contribute to the poet’s desire to remain single. Emily Norcross Dickinson, the poet’s mother, never strove for independence; she focused her time and energy on cooking and maintaining the house and garden. She never found interest in creative expression, and wrote significantly fewer letters to her future husband than he did to her. Neither of them showed real romantic interest in each other – Edward Dickinson was a man who liked to get things done, and wanted to marry as soon as possible, whereas Emily Norcross avoided

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<sup>13</sup> This did not mean, however, that Dickinson did not participate in romance. In fact, there are many theories on her love life, some based on her enigmatic “Master” letters, positing that she had a romantic relationship with Otis P. Lord, Samuel Bowles, Charles Wadsworth, and/or others.

expressing her personal desires, instead letting Edward infer her consent to marry from her evasive letters. During her courtship with Edward Dickinson, he expressed that an ideal wife must possess:

... an amiable disposition – modest & unassuming manner – a thorough knowledge of every branch of domestic economy – good sense, cultivated & improved by a moderate acquaintance with a few of the most select works of taste, & a happy contentment & equanimity of character, & a desire to promote the happiness of all around her. (qtd. in Wolff 37)

Emily Norcross seemed to fulfill all these roles; she remained “modest & unassuming” through her life. Whereas Edward Dickinson was constantly away from the house on business, his wife was almost always home. Yet regardless of her perpetual presence, her daughter did not feel she had a real mother. Dickinson appreciated the work her mother did and respected and loved her father, but she did not feel fulfilled by their parenting. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she writes, “‘Could you tell me what home is’ ... ‘I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled’” (*Letters* 2: 475).

Emily Dickinson lived with her mother almost her whole life, and took care of her during the paralysis that ailed her in the end of her life, so there is no doubt she knew her mother well. While Dickinson stayed in her room and wrote much of the time, her mother almost obsessively cleaned the home. Wolff notes that “[Emily’s] Mother was so self-effacing and silent that her taciturnity had become almost a family joke. If anything, Emily Dickinson’s domestic existence had exaggerated society’s dictum that women be silent and passive” (170). Dickinson was furthermore aware of her mother’s lack of intellectual interests; she once wrote to Higginson that “I have a Brother and Sister – My Mother does not care for thought – and Father, too busy with

his Briefs – to notice what we do” (*Letters* 2: 404). This exaggeratedly domestic and unintellectual life her mother lived was unappealing to Dickinson, and it was her experience with this domesticity, as well as her own aversion to leaving home, that dissuaded Dickinson from marrying.<sup>14</sup> Mentions of this kind of marriage in her poetry are abundant, and this 1863 poem provides an example:

She rose to His Requirement - dropt

The Playthings of Her Life

To take the honorable Work

Of Woman, and of Wife -

If ought She missed in Her new Day,

Of Amplitude, or Awe -

Or first Prospective - or the Gold

In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned - as the Sea

Develope Pearl, and Weed,

But only to Himself - be known

The Fathoms they abide - (*Poems* 375-6)

The first stanza clearly sets up the terms of marriage for this supposed wife. The husband wants her to become a “Woman,” which entails leaving behind her “Playthings.” Dickinson is

<sup>14</sup> However, we cannot ignore the fact that Dickinson seemed to have remained “domestic” her entire life. The poet remained at her family home and cared for her sick mother until her mother’s, and eventually her own, death. The question arises: did she really escape the sort of confinement she feared would happen in marriage? We cannot answer this for sure, but we can point to the fact that for an unmarried woman at this time, there were very few options other than living with one’s family. Perhaps she was not a woman made for nineteenth-century America.

suggesting that the husband sees the woman's interests as mere child's play, but she is not being entirely ironic, for poetry was Dickinson's play, and she used her art to exercise her imagination like a child playing make believe. Dickinson never married and never wanted to, for as Barbara Mossberg observes in *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer is a Daughter*, "It is this masculine ideal of femininity, so successfully assumed by her mother, that Dickinson rejected" (41). This poem may be a representation of Dickinson's life if she had followed the norms of her society; if Dickinson had gotten married, she feels she would have been forced to give up writing. A more satiric notion in this poem is her use of "honorable" to describe the "Work" of being married, for Barbara Mossberg shows that she clearly did not see housewifery as honorable: "The qualities that made [Dickinson's mother] a perfect wife and mother were the very qualities that made Dickinson believe she was not adequately nurtured and that being a wife was not a suitable occupation" (41).

The subject in Dickinson's poetry often embodies or is engulfed by a flower, as in the "Master" letters which will be further discussed in Chapter four, in which the speaker refers to herself as "Daisy." An 1859 poem provides another example of this flower persona, while also providing an example of an unnamed, likely masculine figure:

I hide myself - within my flower,  
 That fading from your Vase -  
 You - unsuspecting - feel for me -  
 Almost - a loneliness - (*Poems 47*)

The flower in this particular poem is an unrooted one, and thus needs a "Vase" in order to survive. If we read the flower character as feminine and the "You"/"Vase" as masculine, we see an erasure of selfhood that may accompany a traditional heterosexual marriage. The poem also

expertly skirts physicality, creating tension between tangibility and intangibility. The last two lines, and more specifically the phrase “- feel for me -,” lead the reader to believe that “my flower” and “your Vase” (or simply the “I” and the “You”) are engaged in a physical relationship, and when the flower “fades from” the vase, the masculine figure tries to reach out and touch her but only experiences lack. The third line reveals that in fact, the “You” is feeling “a loneliness,” thus, he experiences an emotion rather than feeling for the speaker’s body. This poem is an excellent example of Dickinson’s contradictory treatment of masculinity, and I read a hint of masochism through its treatment of self-erasure, a topic this thesis will explore later.

The figure of Death often appears in Dickinson’s world as a powerful, sometimes romantic male, as in an 1878 poem which begins, “Death is the supple Suitor / That wins at last - / It is a stealthy Wooing” (*Poems* 553). For Death to play the role of a suitor indicates Dickinson’s fear and wariness of both death and marriage, and her obsession with the idea of immortality is illuminated by the fact that she could discuss both these experiences in the same poem. Her poetic confusion of marriage and death is not surprising considering the type of language surrounding marriage in nineteenth-century Protestant New England.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, for Dickinson, a desire for immortality was connected to a distrust of the kind of commitment inherent in a marital union; she did not want to be irrevocably tied to a person nor to the fatedness of mortality.

The first stanza of “She rose to His Requirement - dropt” pokes fun at the institution of marriage, describing an unwanted transition from childhood to adulthood, or from play to work. Furthermore in marriage the woman loses “Amplitude” (greatness, or more literally, loudness or

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<sup>15</sup> For as mentioned in chapter one, becoming a Christian meant for Dickinson to “give up the world” (*Letters* 1: 67). The language surrounding death, marriage, and faith all have similar themes of loss and self-erasure.

the ability to speak), “Awe” (wonder, excitement, the mysteries of life), “first Prospective” (expectations for the marriage which are later defeated), and “Gold” (the marriage itself, which fades in time, or literally her personal wealth, given up in the form of dowry). But she cannot speak about her apprehensions, though they are as large as the “Sea.” In another ironic moment, “But only to Himself - be known / The Fathoms they abide,” we learn that only her husband has knowledge of the benefits of their marriage, partly because he is the only one benefiting at all.

Another, earlier poem on marriage is not ironic but has a sinister and serious tone:

A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -  
 Sunrise - Hast Thou a Flag for me?  
 At Midnight - I am yet a Maid -  
 How short it takes to make it Bride -  
 Then - Midnight - I have passed from Thee -  
 Unto the East - and Victory.  
  
 Midnight - Good night - I hear them Call -  
 The Angels bustle in the Hall -  
 Softly - my Future climbs the Stair -  
 I fumble at my Childhood’s Prayer -  
 So soon to be a Child - no more -  
 Eternity - I’m coming - Sir -  
 Master - I’ve seen the Face - before - (*Poems* 90)

This poem also relates wifehood to adulthood, but it is much more ominous. The first stanza paints a picture of a bride-to-be awaiting her wedding, but more important than her wedding is the consummation which she relates to death. Her “Future climbs the stair,” mysterious and

unseen by her, and she knows she will soon no longer be a child. Sex – an unknown to this woman who is a “maid” or a virgin – may seem as scary as death, but perhaps for Dickinson, like in “She rose to His Requirement - dropt,” marriage for a woman is the end of her life and opportunity. “Eternity” could refer both to the finality of death or to the eternal bonds of marriage, and “Sir” and “Master” could refer to the figure of God or Death or to the husband who now essentially owns her. One could read this poem erotically: the dashes increase in quantity near the end of the poem, indicating a shortness of breath and suggesting that she is being penetrated by her new husband during their consummation (“I’m coming”). There seem to be some sadomasochistic undertones, in that the speaker does not appear to have a choice in the marriage or in the consummation, and that the speaker refers to the husband figure as “Master.” Though the final chapter will elaborate further on the implications of such masochistic undertones, here is another poem with similar notions:

He put the Belt around my life -

I heard the Buckle snap -

And turned away, imperial,

My Lifetime folding up -

Deliberate, as a Duke would do

A Kingdom’s Title Deed -

Henceforth - a Dedicated sort -

A Member of the Cloud -

Yet not too far to come at call -

And do the little Toils

That make the Circuit of the Rest -

And deal occasional smiles  
 To lives that stoop to notice mine -  
 And kindly ask it in -  
 Whose invitation, know you not  
 For Whom I must decline? (*Poems* 147)

Again, an unnamed “He” dominates a woman, who is in this case the narrator. As in “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” there is a sadomasochistic undertone in the first lines of this poem – the “Belt” could be a choking device or a whip. But in this poem the Other seems to be God rather than the husband (who in this case confines her with a belt and then leaves) because the speaker becomes a “Member of the Cloud,” a follower of God, one among the angels, but still she is trapped and is so small that people have to “stoop” to notice her (“Life” being used as a metonymic substitute for self). Dickinson is implying that being a follower of God is a petty task, one that requires “little Toils,” and that being a follower takes away from the individual’s selfhood. In this poem and in “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” the narrator is being dominated; the speaker passively accepts her fate and is entirely immobile.

In *The Dickinson Sublime*, Gary Stonum argues that rather than appropriating power, Dickinson allows the reader to feel both sides of a power relationship. The reader understands the submissive through the figures in the poem, and then exercises their own interpretive power through their reading of it. Stonum writes that “Dickinson recommends cherishing power rather than seeking it, wielding it, or submitting oneself to it” (53). Such is the case in “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” and “He put the Belt around my life -,” poems in which the narrator is submissive to the Other. The female in “She rose to His Requirement - dropt” is also submissive

but maintains some knowledge unknown to the Other, even though it is only an awareness of her unfortunate situation.

In a letter to Susan Gilbert, the poet's soon-to-be sister-in-law at the time, Dickinson writes about marriage, or "these unions ... by which two lives are one":

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days  
are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the *wife*, Susie,  
sometimes the *wife forgotten*, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the  
world; you have seen flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before  
the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will *now* need naught but –  
*dew*? ... Oh, Susie, it is dangerous, and it is all too dear, these simple trusting  
spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! (*Letters* 1: 210)

The now-famous line "Oh, Susie, it is dangerous" sums up this letter's resistance to marriage. Similar to the poet's position on faith, that it shrouds people in blindness to reality, Dickinson did not trust the dependency and self-erasure that she believed to accompany marriage. Once time has passed in a marriage, she writes, the wife becomes "forgotten." Again, Dickinson uses the female/flower metaphor to describe the smallness of this life: wives with their heads "bowed in anguish before the mighty sun." The sun here is surely a metaphor for a male figure, probably God or a husband. The wives who entrust themselves to these "spirits mightier" become possessed by this relationship and lose part of themselves in the process. The self-erasure which is addressed here and which this chapter has taken note of is key to one of Dickinson's most interesting aspects: her masochism.

## IV.

*Dickinson's Masochism*

Thus far, this thesis has explored some of the intersections of marriage and religion in Dickinson's poetry, showing how patriarchal notions relate the two. "He," as we have seen, can be a signifier for God and/or husband – in some poems the distinction is more ambiguous than others. The thesis has made a case for Dickinson's ability to achieve and maintain power even when her narrator appears frail and submissive. But Dickinson's portrayal of herself as a *sexual* submissive in her poems and letters is often difficult to defend. This chapter revisits some poems that have previously been analyzed, and also provides close readings of new poems. By looking at these poems and her "Master" letters, and delving into issues of female sexuality, this chapter argues that it is precisely Dickinson's position as the masochist in supposed sexual relationships that allows her to claim power.

Sadomasochism, a term coined by psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, comprises two distinct sexual desires. The first, sadism, is defined as "The experience of sexual pleasurable sensations (including orgasm) produced by acts of cruelty, bodily punishment afflicted on one's own person or when witnessed in others" (Krafft-Ebing 80). Masochism, on the other hand, is "the opposite of sadism. Whereas the latter is the desire to cause pain and use force, the former is the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (Krafft-Ebing 131). But the desire to be dominated does not necessitate a lack of authority – in fact, the masochist requires a significant amount of power in order to fulfill his or her desires. In *Masochism: The Art of Power*, Nick Mansfield writes, "the masochistic subject wants the dominating Other's desire to be represented in the scene, but the representation has to conform completely to his own desire of her desire. He wants her subjectivity to be present, and to appear to be present in and of itself" (6). In order to

command the erotic situation, the masochist requires the compliance of his or her partner as well as their real or acted enjoyment. A relationship between a sadist and a masochist therefore seems to be ideal,<sup>16</sup> whereas a relationship between a sadist or masochist and someone who is neutral to either tendency will result in the former being psychologically in control. The sadist will be psychologically as well as physically controlling, whereas the masochist will be psychologically controlling and physically submissive.

*Venus in Furs*, the book which influenced Krafft-Ebing's coining of the term "masochism" after its author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, was published in 1870. The terms sadism and masochism were not invented until decades after Dickinson's death. She therefore would not have had the vocabulary with which to articulate these topics, but the masochistic trends are hard to ignore in many of her poems. For example, in addition to the religious overtones in "He put the Belt around my life -," the beginning of the poem also indicates sexual sadism:

He put the Belt around my life -

I heard the Buckle snap -

And turned away, imperial,

My Lifetime folding up - (*Poems* 147)

The sexual undertones are made clear with the belt in this poem. If "life" is a metonymic substitute for self, the narrative goes as follows: a male figure puts a Belt around the narrator (who is likely to be female because Dickinson liked to play with feminine subjectivity), containing her and also making her small ("folding up"). Masochism is all about making the self

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<sup>16</sup> Only seemingly, because, as Deleuze phrases it in "Coldness and Cruelty," "a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim ... Neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer. He does of course require a special 'nature' in the woman torturer, but he needs to mold this nature, to educate and persuade it in accordance with his secret project, which could never be fulfilled with a sadistic woman" (40-1).

small in comparison to the partner. The result of this submission is different, however, for the narrator in “Bind me - I still can sing -”:

Bind me - I still can sing -

Banish - my mandolin

Strikes true, within -

Slay - and my Soul shall rise

Chanting to Paradise -

Still thine - (*Poems* 417)

In this poem, the narrator does not say, “If you bind me, I can still sing.” Instead she issues a command: “Bind me.” To be bound and slayed empowers her, for it allows her music (poetry perhaps, if we read Dickinson as the narrator) to be played both within and without. Thus the speaker in this poem is a true masochist; she desires, is empowered by, and *demands* sadistic treatment from her partner. Dickinson paints the speaker as a martyr, an innocent victim to a cruel lover, but this is exactly what the persona desires: the masochist wants to appear puny and powerless, to claim he or she is being enslaved, while they know that this is only a result of their own command of their partner. The partner, unless he or she is a sadist, is coerced into acting sadistically and is only a creation of the masochist’s own desire. One can read the end of the poem as the speaker chanting “Still thine,” declaring, therefore, her partner’s ownership over her, just as Severin tells his dominatrix Wanda in *Venus in Furs*: “I am yours for good or evil” (Sacher-Masoch, 580). Yet this is part of the masochist’s play, it is part of the masochist’s *act* of powerlessness.

As Marianne Noble argues in *The Revenge of Cato’s Daughter: Dickinson’s Masochism*, “‘Bind me - I still can sing -’ demonstrates how masochistic fantasy idealizes such a state of total

subjectivity: though it describes docile submission to annihilation, it is also a poem about the speaker, her body, and her desires” (25). Indeed, we could see this poem and the others as subtle ways for Dickinson to declare for herself her own sexual needs in a time when discussions of female sexuality were taboo. At least, our modern perception of nineteenth-century America suggests that such things were taboo. However, Michel Foucault does the important work of diluting this belief in his collection *The History of Sexuality*. In *Volume I: An Introduction*, Foucault lays out what he calls the “repressive hypothesis”: the belief that sexuality, aside from reproduction, has been silenced for the past three hundred years (since the rise of the bourgeoisie), and that in order to break from this repression we be more open about sex, to discuss it openly. Foucault disagrees with this hypothesis, arguing instead that discussions about sex have only widened and gained more influence in the past few centuries:

... what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it. (Foucault 34)

Sex, Foucault argues, has been used in our culture for scientific exploration. Sex was a science “made up of evasions since, given its inability or refusal to speak of sex itself, it concerned itself primarily with aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations” (53). Its scientific purposes, mixed with religious implications (the requirement to confess one’s deepest sexual secrets and desires), made sex ever-present in modern society.<sup>17</sup> So although it is safe to say that nineteenth-century Amherst

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<sup>17</sup> Although Dickinson and her family were not Catholic and so would not have been expected to confess to a priest, sex would still be something about which one must confess to God, to oneself, etc.

was not a place in which Dickinson or anyone else could speak to just anyone about their sexual desires at any time, it would be a stretch to call the topic taboo.

I have already shown how “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” relates marriage to death; “Eternity” could refer either to the finality of death or to the eternal bonds of marriage. In addition, masochistic undertones appear in the last stanza:

Midnight - Good night - I hear them Call -

The Angels bustle in the Hall -

Softly - my Future climbs the Stair -

I fumble at my Childhood’s Prayer -

So soon to be a Child - no more -

Eternity - I’m coming - Sir -

Master - I’ve seen the Face - before - (*Poems* 90)

An erotic reading of this poem hinges on the interpretation of the words “I’m coming”: the dashes which increase in quantity near the end suggest a shortness of breath, for she is being pleasured by her new husband during their consummation. The line “So soon to be a Child - no more -” suggests a taking of virginity, which conforms to sadism and masochism: the masochist filling the role of the young and comparatively meager subject.

Dickinson’s choice to use “Sir” and “Master” in “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” is important because of its clear relation to her puzzling “Master” letters, written in 1858 and 1861. A series of three letters with no evidence of having ever been posted, these drafts also refer to their recipient as “Sir” and “Master.” “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” was also written in 1861. Below is an excerpt from the second letter; strikethroughs and underlines are Dickinson’s, and bolded words indicate her additions.

Low at the knee that bore  
 her once unto ~~royal~~ wordless rest,  
~~now~~—she Daisy stoops a kneels,  
 a culprit - tell her  
 her offence—fault - Master -  
 if it is ~~not~~ so small  
 eno to cancel with  
her life, Daisy she is satisfied -  
 but punish - do ~~not~~ nt banish  
 her - Shut her in prison -  
 Sir - only pledge that you  
 will forgive - sometime -  
 before the grave, and  
 Daisy will not mind -  
 she will awake in ~~his~~ your  
 likeness - (Letter 2, 40-55)

Scholarly interpretations of these letters posit many possible recipients, including some men with whom she had correspondence, like Reverend Charles Wadsworth and her editor Samuel Bowles. Some ask: what if they were not written to a person at all, but to God or even Satan? This excerpt does not make her intent clear. Daisy (a name Dickinson uses often which is generally accepted to be a pseudonym for herself) is a culprit in the eyes of her Master. Instead of being killed or banished (a word she uses in “He put the Belt around my life -” as well), she wishes to be punished for her wrongdoings. God seems a likely recipient, as Daisy is kneeling

and praying, asking to be punished by and eventually forgiven by God before her death, so that she may not die and/or be banished to hell. One of Dickinson's favorite topics was immortality, so this letter could be another one of these musings, but it also has strong sexual undertones. With Daisy's kneeling she is portrayed as smaller – and earlier in the letter she writes, “Daisy - Daisy - offend it - who / bends her smaller life to / his” (Letter 2, 4-6). Additionally, “Master” is what a masochist could call his or her partner. In *Venus in Furs*, Severin says, “‘I swear to you now by God and my honor, that I shall be your slave, wherever and whenever you wish it, as soon as you command,’ I exclaimed, hardly master of myself” (Sacher-Masoch 710). Severin is no longer in charge of his body or mind, for Wanda is now his Master, just as Dickinson's master is the recipient of this letter. But her intent is still unclear, for just as the masochist desires a master, a follower of God in traditional Christianity wants his or her selfhood to be erased by Him.

The last two lines of this excerpt further muddle Dickinson's intent: the change from “his” to “your” indicates her own indecisiveness about how to address the “Master,” and she refers to herself as well in the third person. The change from “his” to “your” also hints at spiritual connotations. “In his likeness” suggests likeness to God, and Adam was created in God's image, so she will wake up more like a man. “In your likeness,” on the other hand, still seems to be the same allusion to the Bible, but would relate the “Master” figure to God – she will wake up more like her lover, who, if we assume is male, was created in the image of God like Adam. Regardless, there is a clear correlation between “Master” and God.

This perplexing letter is rich with uncertain meaning, but for my purposes it is not necessary to discuss its every aspect. It is, however, important to notice Dickinson's synthesis of masochism toward both God and sex, especially when examined alongside poems with similar

content. Every text that has been examined in this chapter has strong religious overtones: “He put the Belt around my life -” and “A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -” both relate the bonds of marriage to the bonds of humankind to God; “Bind me - I still can sing -” talks about ascension to heaven after death; the second “Master” letter may very well be addressed to God. There is a correlation between the relationship of sadist/masochist and that of God/subject. As a masochist, Dickinson’s speaker takes control of her partner, forcing them to act sadistically toward her – but is this the case when referring to God? Are God and sexual partner one and the same? Though the two are clearly different, Dickinson often writes them as one entity within her poems.

Dickinson’s treatment of these male figures as partners in a sadomasochistic relationship is evidently complex. The identity of the Other in the poems and letters that have been explored is often undefinable; sometimes his identity is two-fold, sometimes it is transformed half-way through, sometimes one identity entails multiple meanings or interpretations. Such is the nature of Dickinson’s poetry; readers are engrossed not by its clarity or tangible positioning but rather by the endless possibility provided by its ambiguity. Her poems, inwardly expandable, are always pregnant with meaning.

In each of these poems and in the “Master” letters, the speaker/Daisy is banished, punished, ignored, bound, or slayed, yet she consistently remains faithful. The desperation within the “Master” letters bears more weight because there is no evidence of a reply, if the letters were even sent at all. Is this masochism perhaps a fantasy for Dickinson? Marianne Noble has written a lot about what it means for women in the nineteenth century to express desire. In *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, she describes an 1851 book that Dickinson read, in which a wife pines for her horrible, abusive husband. Noble writes of the novel, “Her attraction, rather, is for a man like a god, who offers an infinitely rich and rewarding life to his

bride ... even if [it comes] at the cost of pain and anguish" (149). This marriage, Noble writes, turns the wife into a masochist. As we have seen, Dickinson's speaker has similar relationships with unnamed archetypal male figures; the poet's speaker can be simultaneously afraid of, in love with, fascinated by, and erotically desirous towards God, Death, or a lover. Her desire for the man (revealed somewhat in the lines "Eternity - I'm coming - Sir - / Master - I've seen the Face - before -" from "A Wife - at Daybreak - I shall be -") and her fear of him are intertwined and simultaneous.

Is Dickinson's masochism as simple as desire? It cannot be, for her poetry consistently reaches beyond romanticism. Marianne Noble points out that "the masochism in nineteenth-century American women's sentimentality can be seen as an opportunity for agency that presented itself to authors *within* the ideological constraints of the culture" (*The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* 4-5). Dickinson was working with what she had.

Dickinson's portrayals of sadism and masochism may not be her most favorable method of attaining power, but it is essential to remember the constraints around women of her time.

Marianne Noble notes:

Of course, masochism is a less-than-ideal mode of power; control through suffering, for example, is manipulative and dishonest, while an aesthetics of eroticized pain and domination reinforces damaging stereotypes of women. But how many people actually have access to ideal modes of power? Most people are in a position in some way akin to that of Dickinson, struggling to find agency, satisfaction and fulfillment within the particular cultural constraints in which they find themselves. ("The Revenge of Cato's Daughter" 38-9)

Allusive references to female sexuality, to her desires or to the desires of other women, may be the most progressive move Dickinson was able to make, and to ignore Dickinson's masochism would only be a continuation of the tradition of silencing feminine perspectives on sexuality.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for Dickinson as a possessor of power is that Dickinson is the sole author of these poems and letters. Whether or not the voice of these letters and poems appears to be in charge of their situation, Dickinson holds the pen. It is only by Dickinson's direction that male characters take control of her narrator, and it is by her authority that they become sadistic. She is an ideal masochist because she has the poetic ability to control all – male, husband, and even God are voiceless at the hands and mind of Emily Dickinson. Though she was alone in her bedroom, in her mind she created a world of her own in which she possesses the power. She is the ideal orator; she is her own Orpheus, the "warbling teller"; she commands both sides of power relationships, she controls both the sadist and masochist, for she is the poet.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has exhibited the many ways in which Emily Dickinson's poetry reflects her personal rejection of the patriarchal institutions of both religion and marriage. Both these institutions were ever-present through her life; her whole family and all of Amherst, Massachusetts was very Protestant, and marriage was expected of all women. Dickinson did not fit into the era in which she was born – she was a progressive in a time of Protestant stagnancy. Although she wasn't necessarily chastised for being irreligious and for staying unmarried, it was these aspects of her life which detached her from her community. In order to parse out her sometimes contradictory beliefs and to claim power in areas where she may have been disempowered, Dickinson employs various poetic methods of destabilization.

One of these methods is satire. As the first chapter of this thesis explored, Dickinson often used humor when thinking about religion. Critic Suzanne Juhasz saw the poet as "a tease," positioning her as a writer who mildly mocked religion in order to subvert its power. All the letters and poems that were examined in this thesis have a hint of Dickinson's humor and wit, even from her earliest letters when she was only a teenager.

Another method of subversion for Dickinson was her subjectivity. The poet, though she remained secluded in her room much of her life, had a unique talent: she could create a world for her own use that existed inside her mind. In her poetry, Dickinson learned to rewrite the world and to make herself into its god. This skill is one of her methods of claiming power over those who would otherwise overpower her: she claims control over Death, God, over male lovers, and over "Master," who can be seen as a stand-in for all types of masculine figures.

Essentially, Dickinson uses her authorial control to claim a godly position. As the poet, she commands the actions of her subjects. Gary Stonum writes in *The Dickinson Sublime* that

“Reading and writing, like most other acts in Dickinson’s world, are always vulnerable to some form of a master-slave relation. More specifically, authorial control is usually for Dickinson a mark of the author as Master” (15). Dickinson, as the author, is the Master. And her “Master” letters are unendingly fascinating, partly because of the speculation that inherently goes along with them: did Dickinson intend to send the letters? If so, to whom? If not, then they must have been a self-reflexive exercise, in which she is both poet and reader, both Daisy and Master, both sides of a sadomasochistic relationship. Her pleasure correlates to her power, for according to Foucault, these two things “do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (*The History of Sexuality* 1: 48).

For Dickinson’s authorial control is linked directly to her masochism. She directs her counterparts to do as she pleases, and as Marianne Noble smartly points out, “Expressing desire for physical pleasure by fantasizing about submission is neither reactive nor subversive: it is a weird curve, a way of circumventing prohibitions on both female embodiment and female artistry” (*The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* 4). Indeed, the masochistic sex in Dickinson’s poetry should not be dismissed as anti-feminist or insensible, for the poet worked with what she had – writing alone in her bedroom, creating worlds of her own to counteract the real, patriarchal world.

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