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Poetry and Gender in Poem # 709

In the study of Emily Dickinson's poetry, scholars easily put together assumptions from her poetry about who she was. Although these assumptions come easily, the difficulty lies in proving them. The most difficult aspect of Dickinson's poetry is that we know nothing for certain. Some of the assumptions and claims scholars make fall within the realm of gender. As with many poets, scholars look for connections between the author as a person and the speaker in the poems. In Dickinson's case, these connections are easily made, but risky, because often times the speakers in her poems do not identify at all with Dickinson as a person.

In terms of gender, scholars look to make connections between Dickinson as a female author, and her messages about gender roles. As Christanne Miller points out in A Poet's Grammar, "Whether or not they are specifically gendered in the narrative of the poem, Dickinson's speakers assume the culturally feminine role of weakness and self-doubt while in fact powerfully undermining or rebelling against the figure of opposition in the poem's plot" (167-68). Dickinson's poem 709 clearly illustrates Miller's point.

As we know, Dickinson never willingly published her own work. In fact, she refused offers many times throughout her life. When her work was published, it was changed so drastically, that there is no wonder why she refused to publish. In poem 709, she uses this notion of publication as a metaphor for restriction and confinement on many levels. On the most basic level (the plot of the poem), the speaker of the poem explains how publication is the restriction of authors. The next level is how publication is not

only the restriction of authors, but ultimately of the mind. Throughout the poem Dickinson illustrates her distaste of publication as well as the restrictions it causes by use of economic language, and constant repetition of concepts.

In the first lines of the poem, Dickinson sets up the metaphor of restriction when she writes, “Publication- is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man-” (1-2). The use of the word “Auction” implies that the price, and not so much the content is what matters in publication. Also, Dickinson illustrates the second level of restriction, which is restriction of the mind. In lines three and four of the first stanza, she illustrates her distaste for the auction of the mind when she writes, “Poverty – be justifying/ For so foul a thing” (3-4). The speaker of the poem claims that even poverty would be justification enough for not publishing. Therefore, Dickinson illustrates that the money should not matter, but that the content of a work is the most important aspect in publishing.

In the next stanza, Dickinson follows the thought of the previous stanza by illustrating the act of lowering oneself to death as an alternative to publishing one’s work. She writes,

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow - (5-8)

Here the speaker is saying that death, (“From our Garret go White – Unto the White Creator”) is better than selling works to publication.

The final stanza pulls the whole idea together when Dickinson writes, “But reduce no Human Spirit/ To Disgrace of Price” (15-16). In these final two lines, Dickinson

makes the point that the publication of an author's work, is the same as putting a price on a human spirit. Therefore, Dickinson illustrates ultimately what publication does to authors, and further to the human mind. She completes her metaphor on two levels, and leaves the final level for the reader to infer.

The inference we are left with is where gender plays a role. We know that in Dickinson's time, men dominated the world of publication. For instance we know of Thomas Niles who published many of Helen Hunt Jackson's poems (Sewall 581). Thus, we are able to infer that Dickinson used publication in her poem as another metaphor for her society in general, since we also know that men dominated the society of that time. Therefore, in keeping with Christanne Miller's thoughts on Dickinson's poetry, Dickinson's rebellion is that she never published. Although Dickinson kept a traditional female role in her house, she did not follow the status quo in terms of a writer in the world of publication. By not publishing, Dickinson ultimately was not restricted by the male-dominated publishing world, as well as the culture in which she lived.

Works Cited

Miller, Christanne. Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.

Sewall, Richard B. The Life of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.