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English 492

The Female Poet: Nature and Culture Collide

In a letter of 1869 to the Hollands, Dickinson writes, “*My business is to sing*” (*Selected Letters* 177). Similarly, in “She staked her Feathers –,” the female poet is a bird; as Judy Jo Small points out, “In depicting herself as a songbird, Dickinson is aligning herself with the contemporary female poets” (*Critical Essays* 207). However, the female songbird-poet of this poem does not simply remain among a group of female poets; she rises above “Envy” and “Men” and succeeds as an individual artist on her own terms. Subtly however, society enters and views the achievement of the female poet in light of her gender.

In the first line of poem 798, the songbird-poet takes a risk for the sake of her art: she “[stakes] her Feathers” (1). She temporarily succeeds and “[Gains] an Arc” (1). Between the first and second lines, there is an implied fall or failure, but, the songbird-poet rationally “[Debates]” and chooses to “[Rise] again” (2). On this attempt, she is successful; “This time” she flies “beyond the estimate / Of Envy, or of Men –” (3-4). Here, the “Envy” is perhaps the envy of other female or male poets, who despise the songbird-poet for her talent and difference; the reference to “Men” suggests that she tramples the proper boundaries for females that have been set by a patriarchal culture.

In the second stanza, the songbird-poet is free; “now” she dwells “among Circumference –” (5). Again turning to her letters, Dickinson wrote to Higginson in July

of 1862, “Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that – My Business is Circumference” (*Selected Letters* 176). Here Dickinson, like the songbird-poet, ignores the condescending smiles of men and proceeds to poetry, her “Business of Circumference” (176). In line six the image of the poem changes; the bird-poet becomes a sailor whose “steady Boat” may “be seen –” smoothly navigating the waters of poetry (6). The poet is as “At home – among the Billows – As / The Bough where she was born –” (7-8). Therefore, the female poet successfully transcends the sentimental tradition of nineteenth century women poets as songbirds and becomes part of a more enduring poetic tradition.

There is a dichotomy in “She staked her Feathers –” that may become clearer by applying the ideas Sherry Ortner presents in her landmark essay “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” Ortner notes, “The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact” (67). Searching for a reason for this world-wide phenomena, Ortner hypothesizes that females are associated more closely with nature, and men are associated more closely with culture; because society values culture over nature, society also values men over women (72-73). According to Ortner, society views women as closer to nature because of their reproductive roles and their raising of children, which are closer to nature than adults (74; 76-77). Ortner explains:

Woman’s body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, ‘artificially,’ through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal,

transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings. (75)

Therefore, the female is involved in the processes of nature, while the male is free to invent and augment culture. Because culture is that which tames, subdues, and improves upon nature, men dominate women.

This notion of natural woman and cultural man is present in Dickinson's "She staked her Feathers –." The female poet begins the poem as a songbird; she is a part of nature. The song of the bird is natural, naïve, simple, and artless. The songbird-poet risks her delicate "Feathers" and eventually flies "beyond the estimate / Of Envy, or of Men –"; in other words, the songbird-poet, by risking all she has, transcends her societal role and rejects the strictures placed upon her by society (1; 3-4).

In the second stanza, when the poet's business is no longer the simple song of a bird but the culturally deified art of poetry, or "Circumference," she is no longer defined by nature (5). As the poet moves from naïve song to poetry, she also moves from bird to sailor; she is a natural being when she sings naively, but she performs the cultural art of sailing when she produces poetry. The female has left nature behind and, flying over the "Men," she is a cultural being (4). While the poet is "steady" in her new cultural role as poet, she is still associated with nature and the "proper" domestic role of woman (6). Indeed, in line seven, the poet is "At home" upon the sea; while the variant "At ease" would simply suggest comfort, "At home" reminds the reader that the female poet, according to society, is not a fully cultural being and should be in her natural role "At home" (7). In the final line, the female poet is again relegated to her natural home, "The Bough where she was born –" (8). While "Bough" suggests the female as a part of

nature, the mention of birth reminds the reader of the female's reproductive role, which also defines her as closer to nature than culture. Therefore, although the female poet is comfortable as a cultural being, sailing the waters of poetry, the speaker still defines her as a part of nature, which is ultimately secondary. Utilizing Ortner's nature/culture dichotomy, the seemingly successful conclusion of "She staked her Feathers –" gains a bittersweet note, for the poet, in spite of her talent and comfort among true poetry, is defined by, and therefore degraded by, her gender. Simultaneously, however, Dickinson transgresses the stereotypes of nature and culture for the female poet is equally "At ease" in the songbird's domestic sphere of the "Bough where she was born –" as in the culturally defined sphere of the sailor who navigates poetic territory (7; 8). Ultimately, then, Dickinson presents and subverts the notion of the natural female and the cultural male in "She staked her Feathers –."

In a letter of 7 June 1862 to Higginson, Dickinson writes, "I smile when you suggests that I delay 'to publish' – that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin –" (*Selected Letters* 174). As in poem 798, Dickinson here addresses nature and culture. Publication is a cultural act, even more so than writing, for publication knowingly and purposefully presents a literary work as a piece of culture. Dickinson writes that the cultural act of publication is "foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin" (176). The notion of "Firmament" and "Fin" recalls the dichotomy of the songbird and sailor of "She staked her Feathers –" (176). Writing to Higginson, Dickinson is either a creature of the "Firmament" or a fish of the "Fin" whereas in the poem the female poet is bird or sailor; while both options in the letter are natural, the poem presents a natural and a cultural role for the female poet. Therefore, in the letter, Dickinson's given options for herself are

both natural, and she denies any interest in being a member of culture through publication. However, the reader must question Dickinson's motives for responding to Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor"; by definition, a "Contributor" to a magazine is a published author and a cultural force. Even if Dickinson is seeking guidance alone, then she is still attempting to improve upon her natural song and make it culturally viable poetry; arguably, of course, once Dickinson understands the sacrifices of submitting her art to the perusal of her society, she rejects or ignores the cultural advice she once sought from Higginson. Either way, Dickinson in her life as well as in poem 798 vacillates between a natural role for woman as innocent songbird, who would never dream of publishing, and a transgressive role of woman as a cultural force, not writing in a spontaneous overflow of emotion, but with the careful attention of a true artist.

Works Cited

Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Women, Culture, and Society*. Ed. Rosaldo and Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1974. 67-87.