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"Don't put up my Thread & Needle:"
Emily Dickinson Threads Together Different Worlds

681
Don't put up my Thread & Needle
I'll begin to Sow
When the Birds begin to whistle
Better stitches - so -

These were bent - my sight got crooked -
When my mind - is plain
I'll do seams a Queen's endeavor
Would not blush to own -

Hems - too fine for Lady's tracing
To the sightless Knot -
Tucks - of dainty interspersions -
Like a dotted Dot -

Leave my Needle in the furrow -
Where I put it down -
I can make the zigzag stitches
Straight - when I am strong -

Till then - dreaming I am sowing
Fetch the seam I missed -
Closer - so I - at my sleeping -
Still surmise I stitch -

(Franklin, c. 1863)

I intend to examine this poem's subject in relation to nineteenth century views of domesticity and women in the writing sphere. Within these twenty lines, Emily Dickinson manages to analyze the separate spheres of her era by creating a new realm in which to view them. Her poem comes to life both visually and intellectually as she asks us to question gender and other conventions. By identifying herself with both the feminine and masculine tasks of sewing and sowing, Dickinson becomes an androgynous

figure who makes silent statements about the world around her. "Don't put up my Thread & Needle" is a "tapestry" of defiance, much like the one Arachne, the mythological figure, weaved. Both artists achieved immortality from their bold statements, and used their skills to achieve this. Because Dickinson identified herself with sewing/weaving, her words become the "Thread" with which she weaves. "Don't put up my Thread & Needle" is an intricate tale that satirize, observe, transform, have passion and pain, and require both the visual and oral attention of the reader.

After hearing this poem, it is easy to think that it is about sewing, the feminine task. With lines eleven and twelve, "Tucks of dainty interspersions/ Like a dotted Dot," Dickinson makes a direct parallel between writing and sewing, so we know she uses sewing as a metaphor for writing. Additionally, Dickinson writes about the work of a seamstress, but knowing that she did not like to sew, we can assume that she uses the role of seamstress as a metaphor for writing poetry. Even though she draws a parallel between the domestic, feminine task of sewing and her own, traditionally masculine task of writing, she uses a forceful style of expression. She writes in trochaic meter commanding the listener with "Don't put up my Thread & Needle" and "Leave my Needle in the furrow." This last quotation shows an inconsistency in the metaphor of seamstress as poet. The word furrow explicitly refers to the active, masculine task of fieldwork. Dickinson makes references throughout her poem to the act of "sowing" with words that also refer to "sewing." When looking at the poem, then, it is evident that Dickinson creates a visual pun with the word "sowing," as it refers to "sewing" when the poem is read aloud, but clearly refers to sowing by its spelling. Initially, editors thought that Dickinson had misspelled the word sew, and replaced it (Bode 161). Dickinson was

known to make spelling errors, however in this case, we would be doing her a great injustice if we assumed that she intended to write "sewing" instead of "sowing." As well as adopting the feminine role of seamstress, Dickinson's persona dons the masculine role of planter. Dickinson intentionally creates an ambiguous poem by creating an extensive metaphor about "sewing" and using instead the word "sowing." There are many words throughout the poem that refer to both the masculine and feminine task. She leaves us with the responsibility of trying to reconcile the two separate tasks into one, single meaning. She also creates a poem that acts on both the visual and oral levels. Orally, of course the poem appears to be fairly direct in its meaning. Visually, however, there are visible wordplays and Dickinson uses the dash in an unusual form of artistic expression.

Words that we assume are specific to the female task of sewing were also used for sowing in the nineteenth century. Each time she uses a word for sewing, Dickinson also uses a word for sowing in the same stanza. In the first stanza she starts with the image of "Thread & Needle" but then uses the verb "to sow." After the reader first encounters "sow" in the first stanza, the idea is reinforced with the rhyme "so" which, with its neutral spelling, unifies both the feminine and masculine tasks of sewing or sowing. "Stitches" means both "a single and complete movement of a threaded needle in sewing" and "a strip of plowed land" (OED). Dickinson creates a chiasm with the last line in the first stanza so that "stitches" does not follow "sow," and is therefore better able to take on both meanings. Also, she makes a visual pun with the word "stitch" because "stich" means a line of verse, but it is pronounced "stick."

In the next stanza, Dickinson refers to bent stitches as a cause of her sight being "crooked." This makes logical sense in the context of sewing, but a closer examination of

the words' meaning is necessary to find where she talks of sowing. "Bent" can also be a "meadow of stiff grass, an open field, or an unenclosed pasture" (OED) Dickinson's tone in reference to her bent stitches is apologetic perhaps because she is striving for some sort of enclosure or direction. "Hems" in the next stanza provides this containment as it refers generally to any sort of boundary or border. "Plain" is a flat surface or field, which has been ploughed by human means, and is ready for "seams," or furrows, for planting. So, her mind will be "plain," implying that it will be ready for sowing with the inspiration she once had before. "Seams" imply the order that Dickinson strives for in both cases of "sowing" and "sewing."

The fourth stanza combines the two tasks with a "Needle in the Furrow." Although, "furrow" is technically a "narrow trench made in the earth by a plough," it can also refer more generally to anything resembling a furrow, like a seam (OED). In the fifth stanza, Dickinson is in a sort of hibernation -- she is "sleeping" (or "sighing") and merely "dreaming" (or "deeming") of "sowing" or repairing her "bent stitches" as she awaits Spring "when the Birds begin to whistle."

The third stanza is the exception to Dickinson's careful integration of the two tasks of sewing and sowing into one. She speaks only in terms of sewing here, and uses it as a direct parallel to her writing. At the central point in the poem, she reaches a "Knot" where she resolves to concentrate on the minute detail of her work in order that her poems be concise and "fine" enough for a "lady." Dickinson concludes that the "Tucks of dainty interspersions" in sewing are like the "dotted Dots" in poetry. She reserves this stanza to distinguish poetry as a concise, tightly bound art form. The feminine task has dominance over the central part of the poem, but only serves to

enhance the other, masculine task by its "knot" (or, what it is "not"). It is important to allow for each word to encompass multiple meanings as critics have analyzed both her poems and her letters and deduced that she had a tremendously diverse vocabulary. One of Dickinson's favorite books was her dictionary (Miller 153). How can we reconcile these two, seemingly opposed tasks in one poem?

In her essay, "Reading Dickinson Doubly," Suzanne Juhasz talks about how we can read Dickinson's paradoxical poems and meanings as unified. In order to read Dickinson, she says we must have a technique, and a perspective, that allows us to see doubly. The ambiguities in Dickinson's writing reveal both "the abiding power of the patriarchal perspective and the manifold difference of the female perspective" (Juhasz, 218) In other words, Dickinson challenges a cultural standard in her poetry by enacting it, but also by putting it into a new, critical realm. This realm in poem 681 consists of joining the two separate worlds together to act as direct foils to each other. By explaining the feminine act of sewing simultaneously with the masculine act of sowing, Dickinson places the two in direct opposition. In once sense, the latter becomes more powerful because the reader must take time to reveal the hidden meaning. However, the former is readily apparent and, as we saw earlier, the central "knot" of the poem revolves around the more intricate and thoughtful act of "sewing." In the end, however, one is not more powerful than the other. Dickinson's poem has both masculine and feminine traits. The artistic process of making her poetry is widespread and sweeping, as well as "dainty" and "fine." Dickinson ends the poem with the words "I stitch," which (as a verb) means "to plough deeply" (OED). In poem 681, she continues to dig deeply in her analysis of her

world and creates a profound and ideal statement by placing the masculines and feminine roles together in a realm where they coexist.

In reality, however, the male and female worlds were very separate. Women were bound to the domestic role in the nineteenth century. They were expected to do all of the housekeeping which included cooking, cleaning, sewing (clothes and otherwise), and childrearing. Dickinson did not like sewing at all, but she was relentlessly neat and loved to bake (Dobson 234). The Dickinson family had several seamstresses who made their clothes. The job of the seamstress was to make clothes for the family, but they did not necessarily sew the finished product. They might cut and style the article of clothing, but the women in the household were expected to complete it. The seamstress was a very well-respected position - she would be addressed by title (Miss or Mrs.) and was often known from the neighborhood or town (Green 100). Sewing as a past-time was also popular in the nineteenth century. It was a social affair, and rarely done in solitude. Sewing offered rewards; women took pleasure in a good fit, straight seams, and even stitching. They would take apart and redesign their products -- it was a domestic affair altogether. Clothes and items that were used in the home were produced in the home (Strasser, 134).

Dickinson may not have liked sewing, but she certainly was familiar with it as it was an integral part of a woman's education in the nineteenth century. Dickinson identifies with the art of sewing by making allusions to it in her poetry and letters. She clearly identifies her creative process in poem 681 with the act of sewing. Dickinson makes allusions to sewing, darning, embroidery, and weaving in her letters as well as her poems. In fact, she would sometimes send little pieces of patchwork along with her

poems and letters to add another visual dimension. In 1859, she took two engravings from an old book of her father's and sewed them to a poem for Sue. In 1881, on July fourth, she made her own flag with three small braids of red white and blue and pinned them with a thorn to a letter (Farr, 328).

If we examine the art of needlework (or sewing) with the way Dickinson created her poems, we can find a lot of similarities. She too took pride in her writing, and would take apart and redesign her poems. Dickinson would recycle her favorite words in various poems, much like remnants of fabrics could be re-used into the domestic task of quilt making. Her use of the dash is reminiscent of sewing as it weaves in and out of her words. Her dashes of "interspersions" throughout poem 681 resembles stitching, and she even referred to her poems once as needlework in a letter:

I cannot tint the Carbon nor embroider the Brass, but send you a homespun
rustic picture I certainly saw in the terrific storm. Please excuse my
needlework (quoted in St. Armand, 154).

In relation to the nineteenth tradition of taking remnants (fragments) of material and sewing them together to make "crazy quilts," Dickinson's poems have that same kind of effect (Green 133). One of her critics, Cristanne Miller, writes that Dickinson wrote in the style of typical feminine rhetoric. Like "quilt-making" poetry allows for more freedom than prose because the poet can link together dissimilar concepts (173).

Dickinson's syntax is inconsistent, her persona shifts from poem to poem, and visually her poems have the effect of being sewn together in a lively manner.

In "Don't put up my Thread & Needle," Dickinson has sewn together the separate spheres of her disparate, fragmented world. The dashes are Dickinson's way of both

distinguishing and unifying meaning. They allow for the reader to construct Dickinson's new realm piece by piece in frames of "suspended animation" (Juhasz 219). So, when Dickinson alternates between the language of a sewer and the language of a sower within each stanza, the dashes allow for each idea to remain separate. At the same time however, they literally link each line together. For example, the third stanza connects a "Needle in the furrow" with "zigzag stitches" with a dash at the end of the first line, suggesting a continuity and movement from one concept into the next. Alice Fulton, a poet and critic of Dickinson, says this method of suspended animation allows for the reader's full participation: "[Dickinson's] poems prolong the intoxicating moment before choice when all options are potentially ours" (153). The dashes also operate as a means to leave options open -- each reader can have a different interpretation of the poem. For example, the last stanza could read in terms of both the masculine and feminine tasks: "Until then, dreaming I am so(e)wing, I fetch the seam I missed. Closer I am to so(e)w[ing]. By sleeping, I still surmise I stitch." Alternatively, we could see it in reference to only the masculine task of sowing: "I till (the verb to till) then. I my dreaming, I am sowing, and I fetch the seam (furrow) I missed. Closer I am to sowing. By sleeping I still surmise I stitch." Finally, the dashes, because of their synthetic quality, alert the reader to the construct of language (Crumbley 95). For example, in line four we are forced to pause at the word "so" because of its disembodiment from the text. We then become aware of the author's hand in the work, and the dashes are then as visible as stitches in a quilt. The actual constructing of the poem, with its suspended animation and its awareness of language, mimics the construction of the world and its

rules (Hagenbuchle, 64). Dickinson uses the dash as a means to bring our attention to her skillful manipulation of language, as well as the broader construct of gender in her world.

Dickinson's poem may have been so dichotomous because of her gender. She was wavering between producing poems like a man, but not being able to communicate them on her terms and had a "divided identity" (Finnerty 66). Her uneasy relationship with patriarchal standards may have produced the ambiguity in her language. That is, she may have had trouble being a female and a poet, when poetry was generally reserved as part of the male sphere. In his essay "Emily Dickinson and the Feminine Rhetoric," James Machor comments on the power achieved in Dickinson's poetry with her use of the diaphoric metaphor, as opposed to the epiphoric techniques of her contemporary writers (both male and female). Machor defines the diaphoric trope as the combining of "two seemingly disparate ideas, so that the linking itself becomes the vehicle for the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis" (133). Through her willingness to experiment with different forms and combinations, Dickinson automatically questions the world in which she lives. In poem 681, she overturns gender as constructed by her society and asks the reader to take a new perspective. As noted with the use of the dash and bringing the reader into a consciousness of the constructs of language, Dickinson also makes the reader aware of the constructs of gender with her poem. Blending gender is a way to express power and strength. In poem 681, Dickinson obviously identifies her artistic process with both the masculine and the feminine realms, so makes the bold statement that her poetry embraces both characteristics. At the same time, however, she is unsettling the gender arrangements of her era. Since "gender is created by circumstance," as argued by Finnerty, Emily was practically androgynous (70). She was

a woman, but she occupied the traditionally masculine activity of writing. This conflict is revealed in both poem 681 and in her letters. Dickinson signed her name in various different ways, and on many occasions, gave herself the non gendered name of "E. Dickinson" or just "Dickinson" (Letters). On one occasion, she signed her name "Brother Emily," a blatant break in gender barriers. Where Finnerty contends that "one is maintained by one's opposite," it is apparent that Dickinson had no opposite and chose not to choose a specific gender identity in her poem.

Women in the field of writing had not become an accepted or commonplace occurrence in the nineteenth century. Even if a female poet was talented, she could not survive solely on the income of her publishing. Luckily for Dickinson, however, she was financially stable. She was free to write poetry without having to follow specific conventions in her poetry. She could observe and comment on her world without judgment, and this is what we find in "Don't Put up my Thread & Needle" -- she uses the separate roles of male and female to highlight and unify each other. By being very exposed to the female sphere, Dickinson can comment on the male sphere (and authority in general). Like her obsession with death that sharpened her view of the living world, her separation (essentially) from the domestic role of the female and the masculine act of sowing, Dickinson could draw similarities between the two and make them unite in language. Where women sewed together, Dickinson "sewed" in private. Some of her contemporaries had to rely on their sewing as well as their writing to provide for themselves. Lousia May Alcott, for example, in addition to her writing, had to sell various hand-sewn items in order to support herself. Women writers were seen as rebelling against the world of separate spheres. Harriet Beecher Stowe would hide her

"scribblings" in her sewing basket when she had company. By 1868, it was considered acceptable to be an "authoress" if the role of housewife, or any other domestic duty, was not neglected (Hedges 344).

Dickinson did not altogether abandon sewing as a task. She refers to sewing in two of her letters to Sue. The first was in 1853 on a "Thursday afternoon." She writes: "A tear fell on my work a little while ago, so I put up my sewing, and tried to write to you" (quoted in Hart and Smith 39). Dickinson uses the vague, nonspecific term of "work" here, which could refer to either writing poetry, or it could refer to specific work she is doing in respect to sewing. In another letter, written on a "Monday evening" in 1864, Dickinson confides in Sue:

I want to walk with you as seeing yet unseen. You say you walk and sew alone.

I walk and sew alone. I don't see much of Vinnie -- she's moody, dusting stairs!" (quoted in Hart and Smith, 51).

In this letter, Dickinson reveals more about her domestic tendencies. As discussed earlier, women in the nineteenth century viewed sewing as a social affair. Very unlike the typical nineteenth century woman, Dickinson makes it clear in this letter that she sews alone. Again, she may be using sewing as a metaphor for writing, but in both cases she reveals her tendency for quiet, solitary needlework. Another striking phrase in this letter is the first sentence quoted above. Dickinson prefers to be a silent observer. She wants to see, but be unseen. In this poem, she has this sense of vision by writing privately about the public world around her.

More commonly than using sewing as a metaphor for writing poetry, Emily Dickinson often used the spider and its action of spinning a web as a symbol for the

process of poetry, her life's work. As a spider weaves its web daily, Dickinson wrote her poems with the same devotion and necessity. The word "spider" is include in six of Dickinson's poems, four of which allude to the task of sewing. In the poem "A Spider sewed at Night," Dickinson chooses again to defy conventions and write a very difficult poem:

A Spider sewed at Night

Without a Light

Opon an Arc of White

If Ruff it was of Dame

Of Shroud of Gnome

Himself himself inform -

Of Immortality

His strategy

Was Physiognomy -

(c. 1869, Franklin)

"Light" could refer to the conventions that Dickinson chose not to follow as she wrote "Opon an Arc of White," or her white page. The spider uses his task of sewing as a "strategy" for "immortality." As in "Don't put up my Thread & Needle," Dickinson uses methods to involve the reader in order that her work come alive. In this case, her syntax is very unclear, and the readers are left to interpret for themselves the meaning of the poem, much like the art of "physiognomy." Dickinson discusses the creative process and

reinforces the theme of solitude and sewing alone. She sews ". . . at Night/ Without a Light," which Richard Sewall interprets as biographical. Dickinson probably "sewed" at night -- her lines sometimes run off the page, and Sewall attributes this to the dim light she would have worked under (398).

Another spider poem that continues more concretely the themes discussed in "Don't put up my Thread & Needle" is poem 513, "The Spider holds a Silver Ball." The spider's "trade" is more clear in this poem: he weaves a tapestry of words together in a visually lively way.

The Spider holds a Silver Ball

In unperceived Hands -

And dancing softly to Himself

His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds -

He plies from nought to nought -

In unsubstantial Trade -

Supplants our Tapestries with His -

In half the period -

An Hour to rear supreme

His Continents of Light -

Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom -

His Boundaries - forgot -

(c. 1891, Franklin)

The use of the dash is similar to that of poem 681, as Dickinson separates certain words from the body of the poem, "unwinds" and "forgot." However, the pattern of the dash is more consistent and in a specific pattern rather than dispersed throughout. There is a dual world set up in this poem between that of the "Spider" and that of the "Housewife."

Dickinson identified with the spider and his "unsubstantial Trade," of weaving "Tapestries," as we know she identified with the art of sewing. His "unperceived Hands" ties back into the letter that Dickinson wrote to Sue (quoted on page 12) where she expresses the want to observe the world undetected by others. The silent solitude of the spider is juxtaposed with the dominant presence of the "Housewife." Here, the overtly domestic role is given not to Dickinson, but to the world outside of hers -- the world that sets up "Boundaries," or conventions. Ironically, the feminine housewife is more powerful than the masculine spider. Dickinson plays with gender roles again, as she identifies with the masculine spider. The "Continents of Light" are specifically "His" (*italics mine*), and stress the disparity between the spider's rules and conventions, and the housewife's. He "plies from nought to nought," weaving between his world and the other -- both "nought," or not in respect to each other, as "one is maintained by one's opposite" (Finnerty 74). The similarities between the themes in this poem and the themes in 618 are numerous, and Dickinson's identity with spiders can be taken to another level.

Although spiders themselves are not symbols for poets, there is one myth closely associated with the spider: the Arachne myth. This myth has various different versions, but the most commonly known was told by Ovid in his book *Metamorphoses*. Like Dickinson, Arachne was very talented at her skill as a weaver. She was so talented, in fact that she challenged the goddess Minerva (the very goddess who had taught her the

skill of weaving) to a weaving contest. Both women set to work at making a tapestry, and when they were finished the differences in style, texture, and story were drastic. While Minerva maintained a symmetrical and ordered composition, Arachne's tapestry was "swirling" and lacking in fluidity or form (Galinsky 82). Minerva wove a focused narrative that was both morally instructive and complementary of the gods. Arachne depicted multiple tales of the gods and their lascivious behavior in seducing mortal lovers. Of course, Arachne was punished for revealing the lustful side of the gods' behavior. She was also punished for her ability to depict so realistic a tapestry: her cloth "undulated with life" (Galinsky 49). Minerva turned Arachne into a spider where she would be destined to spin (weave) eternally.

There are many parallels between Arachne's tale of defiance and Dickinson's role as a poet. Like Arachne, Dickinson often challenged authority and convention in the subject matter, as we have seen so far in poem 681. Also similar to Arachne, Dickinson did not use unified and symmetric language to reveal her criticisms, she requires the reader's interaction to make her works come to life with meaning and imagery. The struggle between Arachne and Minerva resembles closely the tension between nineteenth century expectations of women poets and Dickinson's poetic styles. For example, Minerva's tapestry established divine order and the conventional view of respect for deities (Galinsky 82). There were similar conventions for women in the nineteenth century. They were expected to be morally instructive, pious, domestic, and maternal. If a woman chose to be a "poetess," these values were expected to come across in her poetry. We can see examples of these expectations in two anthologies of women's poetry that were published in the 1800's. The first book, edited in 1848 by Rufus Willmot

Griswold, includes a short, biographical introduction for each "poetess" in the book. The introductions undoubtedly consist of marital status, father's name and reputation, contributions to the community, and details of their experience with writing. Most importantly, Griswold praises them extensively for their moral, religious, and domestic activity. For example, of Caroline Gilman he writes: "her works will long be valued for the spirit and fidelity with which she has painted rural and domestic life . . . Her *Recollections of a New England Housekeeper*, and *Recollections of a Southern Matron*, are equally happy, and . . . are pervaded by a love of nature and good sense" (italics mine, 52). Although she is not well known, Griswold deduces from Gilman's writing that she has "good sense" and is faithful. Of a more famous "poetess" and contemporary of Dickinson, Lydia Sigourney, he writes: "She sings impulsively from an atmosphere of affectionate, pious, and elevated sentiment, rather than from the consciousness of subjective ability . . . [her works] express with great purity and evident sincerity the tender affections with are so natural to the female heart . . . Love and religion are the unvarying elements of her song" (italics mine, 93). As evident in this description, women in the nineteenth century were often considered "natural" and "spontaneous" because they were closer to nature and more emotional (Petrino 21). These stereotypical standards were upheld by women editors as well. In fact, the second anthology edited by Caroline May, expands on this idea of women's poetry as expressions of pure and exemplary emotions. May refers to poems by women as "effusions" throughout her anthology. Of one "poetess," she commends the "domestic affection and pure religious feeling" in her poetry (115). May directly refers to another "poetess" in terms of nature: "The modest and beautiful flower so strikingly fearful of being brought into notice . . ." (157). In the

introduction to Lydia Sigourney's poetry, May describes at length Sigourney's devotion to reading and writing. She then assures her readers that:

. . . books did not engross her attention to the exclusion of other duties, for she loved domestic employments; and was as industrious in her attention to them, as in her favorite studies. She was particularly fond of spinning on the great wheel, and constructed in this way many fabrics of enduring benefit to the family . . . The one great aim of her soul, is -- to do good (77).

We see, then, that by using sewing as a metaphor for writing, Dickinson is being defiant. She did not enjoy domestic activities, but rather spent most of her time perfecting the art of writing her poems. Poem 681 is not morally instructive, pious, or emotional.

Dickinson describes both processes of sewing and sowing in a personal, unsentimental manner. Further her poems often strayed from being moralistically instructive, or clear in their form, rhythm or meter. These characteristics that strayed from convention were even considered "less sincere" (Petrino 28). Arachne's tapestry, so skillful in its weaving that it seemed to live, was like Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson brought her poetry to life by making the reader interact, grammatically and intellectually. She also made it visually stimulating with her use of the dash.

If we look again at the first line of her poem, "Don't put up my Thread & Needle," and reconsider another meaning for the words "thread" and "needle" they can also be seen in a more mythological context. Thread traditionally was "a representation of the continued course of life in classical mythology where the thread was spun, then cut off by the Fates" (OED). "Needle" can also be an instrument of direction: "A piece of magnetized steel used in finding direction" (OED). In addition to poem 681, Dickinson

referred in five other poems to her "Needle," but meant in those cases, the needle of her compass. In a letter to a friend, she wrote: "The sailor cannot see the North, but knows the Needle can." (Letters). So, she views her poems as weaving together a narrative. She sews together her life story through her poems, not with one continuous strand of thread, but with a continuous stream of words. As with the "Thread" in mythology, when the words ended, so did her life's work.

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