

# My understanding of lady lazarus poem

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Sharon Cameron My reading of the poem is hypothetical by default, for its syntax alone, not to mention the elliptical progressions and the rapid transformation of pronouns, insists upon respect for its difficulty. What we can ascertain is that the speaker is comparing the life of the heavenly bride to that of the earthly one. The woman exalted in the first half of the poem is royal by virtue of what she does not have. Without the sign or ring legitimating marriage and without the swoon of sexuality, this woman, seemingly self-elected, is dangerously close to Plath's "Lady Lazarus," who will also insist upon "Acute Degree" and who will carry the claim of suffering one step further into hyperbole than Calvary. This miracle woman without the swoon, divine by virtue of its absence makes us hunger for a more generous world where salvation is not had at the expense of life. It is the other world we think we are getting when we read of "the swoon / God sends us Women / When you hold Garnet to Garnet / Gold to Gold." But the transition is strangely enough no transition; deprivation is here not absent, it is simply of another order. "When you hold Garnet to Garnet / Gold to Gold" (in the secular context of the earthly wedding ceremony), what you get is death ("Born Bridalled Shrouded / In a Day").

The shift in pronouns is a shift to the colloquial "you," almost as if in talking implicitly about sexuality the speaker had to cast attribution as far from herself as possible. But in the very process of distinguishing herself from the wealth of the earthly alternative, she temporarily allies herself with it, with the swoon "God sends us Women." In the fusion and confusion of these lines, both options funnel to death, the contraction of the self into its own ashes. For the birth of the wife becomes the death of the woman. Upon such

sacrifices, the gods themselves throw incense. The problem is that both alternatives require sacrifice.

Between the nothing that is the self and the nothing to which the self gets reduced when it capitulates to another, we see our options clearly. While it is true that the jewels in the poem suggest the blessing of the earthly wife, the lines, coming as they do in the middle of the poem ( as a manifestation of its transition from divine to earthly), are a half-implied metaphor for the necessary complement of divine and earthly wife, for each by herself is inadequate. Thus although the lines tell us that garnet is held to garnet and gold to gold ( each alternative able to assess only itself), the proximity of the lines requires us to see the colors (and the choices they represent) held against each other, as if the speaker's vision of impossibility momentarily enabled its transcendence. " Stroking the Melody" is perhaps a metaphor for the very impossibilities delimited by the poem. For the need to get a hold on sound, to imbue it with physical dimensions, reminds us that we have a metaphoric world to console us for the impoverishment of the physical world. Like Lear's desire to " sweeten the imagination" or to wipe the hand " of mortality," Dickinson's phrase suggests that simultaneous perception of loss and compensation that grips the mind at such moments of imaginative invention, as, in the process of calling wishes into being, the speaker inevitably acknowledges their status as wishes, not subject to fulfillment in reality.

If only one could " sweeten the imagination" or " Strok[e] the Melody." So utterance grows out of desperation and registers violence at its fact. Yet

options exist because we must take them. We cannot, as Sartre pointed out, not choose. This recognition is the moment the poem records. For the speaker, from the vantage of Calvary, looks enviously at the earthly alternative and finds that it is nothing. Previously she thought she could imitate ill name, if nothing else, the title of the earthly wife. Now it is apparent that the imitation is purposeless. She could not have it if she wanted it, and if she had it, she sees now that she would not want it. Her title, then, like the earthly wife's, is empty, the "Melody" sought after but finally strained once it is acknowledged that any possession is by itself inadequate. The problem of otherness perceived as death; the problem of otherness for lack of which there is death: the alternatives in these poems are stark ones. Yet the poems themselves are not stark, are, in fact, loaded with energy that is, as I have been suggesting, close to explosive. And it is the energy that needs accounting for, fed as it is by the fuel of sexuality on the one hand, and death on the other, by that combustible that ignites into rage. In the poems presence seems manifested as rage and, in particular, as rage at all that is temporal, all that has a history whose requirement is sacrifice and choice.

From Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre. Copyright © 1979 by The Johns Hopkins UP. Sandra Gilbert Surely this poem's central image is almost the apotheosis of anguish converted into energy, what Dickinson elsewhere called the "ecstasy of death." Transforming the puzzles of life into the paradoxes of art, the poet/speaker is on a kind of "gay, ghastly, Holiday," reminding us that she is the same woman who once told Thomas Wentworth Higginson that "I had a terror . . . I could tell to none and so I

sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground because I am afraid.” It is significant, however, that the “ gay, ghastly, Holiday” into which Dickinson so often converts her “ great pain” is not a weekend in “ Domingo” or a passage to India. On the contrary, though she characterizes herself as an Empress of Calvary, this poet is always scrupulously careful to explain that she “ never saw a moor . . . never saw the sea” (1052). Her muse-like “ King who does not speak” maintains his inspiring silence in a parlor, after all, and even the Master who owns the “ Loaded Gun” of her art sleeps on an “ Eider-Duck’s / Deep Pillow” that sounds as homely as any bedding nineteenth-century New England had to offer. Dickinson loved exotic place-names admiring, for instance, the “ mail from Tunis” that the hummingbird brought to the bushes on her father’s ground (1463) but nevertheless the news of those distances came to her at home, in her parlor, her kitchen, her garden. from “ ‘ The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill’: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood” in *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Suzanne Juhasz. Copyright © 1983 by Indiana UP. Paula Bennett Read against the earlier poems, it is clear that Dickinson meant “ Title divine” to be about her mature identity as woman, an identity she assumed sometime in late 1861 or early 1862 and was apparently eager to share with Samuel Bowles.

While she acknowledges that she has assumed this identity at real cost, it is also, as she underscores in the 1866 version of the poem sent to Sue, a “ Tri Victory.” For in becoming a “ Wife-without the Sign” that is, a wife without an actual husband and therefore, also without the “ swoon” or loss of self that real marriage involved—Dickinson had at last found the way out of the

personal and social dilemma that had plagued her from adolescence on. In “marrying”-without-marrying the Master, she could, albeit by a sophisticated twist, free herself permanently both from her social obligation to marry and from the childhood she had sought so long to escape. By becoming a bride, as it were, in perpetua, she remained woman on the point of transformation, a woman who had renounced both the life that had been, childhood, and the life that in her society was meant to be, marriage. And thus she achieved a new ontological status: woman-without-being-wife. It is this definition of self as woman on the point of transformation or bride in perpetua which, I believe, became the basis for Dickinson’s new poetic voice after 1861. It was a voice that obtained its power from the fact that the person behind it had experienced in her poetry, if not in her life, all the stages of a woman’s life, from childhood through ecstasy and marriage to, finally, martyrdom and death. This person could, therefore, speak with all the authority that Dickinson’s poetry had hitherto lacked. By using her poetry to become a bride in perpetua or “ Wife-without the Sign,” Dickinson was able to make her role as poet and her role as woman one. It was a piece of linguistic legerdemain to be sure, but for Dickinson it worked. If she could not be a woman in real life without marrying, then she could marry and be a real woman in her art. Symbol-maker that she was, for Dickinson this “ Victory” was more than adequate. It gave her both the security and the freedom she required to explore the powers lodged within herself. She was a poet and a woman at last.

A number of different factors made becoming a “ Wife-without the Sign” or bride in perpetua a perfect means to Dickinson’s new status as woman poet

or queen. To begin with, in the nineteenth century a woman's bridal was the mid-point between the two great, unalterable mysteries in her life: birth and death. Upon these three occasions, at birth (symbolized by baptism), at death, and when she got married, a woman wore white and approached most closely the "blameless mystery" of God. Insofar as a bride took a new name or "Title," she was moreover both dead and reborn during the ceremony, dying to her old life and baptized into her new one. As the midpoint in a woman's life, the marriage ceremony was also, equally important, her apex or "Acute Degree," the moment conferred upon her by God when she experienced her greatest rapture or joy in living. And it was the moment in which she was translated from one state of being into another, receiving not only a new name, but a new status, power, and identity.

From *My Life a Loaded Gun*: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity. Copyright © 1986 by Paula Bennett. Reprinted with the permission of the author. Wendy Martin Ironically reversing the image of herself as the helpless waif, Dickinson presents herself as "Royal," an "Empress of Calvary." Having sustained and learned from her suffering, she has mastered it. This is a love poem, but it is also an announcement of her power—her capacity to experience intense emotions and to survive their annihilating potential. Although her love has been unrequited, she has not been defeated by her suffering. She is not ruled by a master—she reigns over herself. As we have seen, the compensatory image of the queen in command of her energy appears repeatedly in Dickinson's poetry as an antidote to the destructive impact of romantic imagery on women. This poem also takes an ironic view

of conventional marriage, revealing Dickinson's scorn for the loss of self women experience when they wed; there is a pun on "bridalled" and bridled, as the wife's expectations about her new life—"Born"—are contrasted with the reality of her now constricted world—"Shrouded." For Emily Dickinson, the wife's expectations of security in marriage are as illusory as the converted sinner's hopes of heaven.

From *An American Triptych*: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich. Copyright © 1984 by The University of North Carolina Press. Gary Lee Stonum The poem is sometimes read, in the context of the separated-lovers plot, as referring to a secret and platonic betrothal that has left the speaker spiritually wedded but without any public sign of her estate and without the sexual swoon of earthly nuptials. The title being divine, it will be recognized only in heaven, when the lovers meet again. Whether we adduce such context or not, the speaker's committed but uncertainly determined state allows her to question wifedom without quite being fully bridled and shrouded but also without merely anticipating it as prospect. The stakes are triumph and status, as the imagery of titles, degrees, crowns, and victories makes clear, but no clear answer is forthcoming to the question in the last line. The poems in the marriage group lend themselves especially well to a strategic deferral, for a moment of deliberation is built into the plot. Whatever empowerment she (or more rarely he) envisions in the marital state, she must commit herself to that state irrevocably. Moreover, thanks mainly to feminism, we have recently had little difficulty appreciating Dickinson's reluctance to commit herself to the Master's care. Indeed, contemporary prejudices make it difficult to understand the lure of



embridalment, about which Dickinson is equally emphatic. Perhaps more fully than we, she accepts in these poems the most baleful premise of the romantic sublime, namely that empowerment requires emulating another's majesty.

From *The Dickinson Sublime* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.) Copyright © 1990 by the Board of regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

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

are based, for through the development of these poems, Calvary is linked with victory, rather than with defeat or (only) anguish. from “ Emily Dickinson: Fleshing Out a New Word” Emily Dickinson Journal Vol. I. 1 (1992). Online Source: [http://www. colorado. edu/EDIS/journal/articles/I. 1. Hoefel. html](http://www.colorado.edu/EDIS/journal/articles/I.1.Hoefel.html) Kim Hosman

Though Dickinson uses certain religious words and tropes repeatedly, the meaning she attaches to them may vary from one poem to another. In “ That I did always love,” Calvary is the emblem for her thoughts on salvation, love, and the risk of tragic loss should a man persist in doubting the constancy of a woman who loves him and is worthy of his trust. In “ Title divine,” Dickinson again uses the image of Calvary, but she refocuses our associations with the word and shifts the emphasis to issues not of doubt and faith, but of recognition and fate. Consequently, the tone is less personal and more judgmental — even angry. To understand better Dickinson’s role as translator, it is useful to recall some of the conventional meanings of the Christian images that appear in this poem: first, “ Title divine.” In his sermon “ The Mortal Immortalized,” Charles Wadsworth describes the terms “ the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11: 25), which Christ bestows on himself just before raising Lazarus from the dead, as being Christ’s “ Divine titles” (234). The power to give life, therefore, is implied in Dickinson’s “ Title divine.” Then there is the figure of Calvary, the place where Christ was crucified along with two thieves. The image is of a hill with three crosses on it, symbolizing both the scene of the sacrifice and the trinity. Finally, the “ Crown” and the “ Sign” clearly recall the crown of thorns and the mocking sign placed over the cross that read “ King of the Jews.” “ Born — Bridalled —

Shrouded — ,” and “ Tri Victory” echo Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and trinity respectively. “ Is this — the way?” recalls Christ’s words “ I am the way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14: 6). The images that Dickinson chooses are some of the most poignant and frequently cited in Protestant discourse. They are descriptive of the ultimate sacrifice, the climactic event of the New Testament scriptures. The Son of God submits to humiliation and death, offering redemption even to those who, failing to recognize divinity, mock and torture him. Here are words and figures with weight behind them, with connotations Dickinson finds particularly apt for describing her subject: women and the sacrifices they make — whether as wives, poets, or Christians.

In “ Title divine” Dickinson presents the figure of the “ Wife” crucified. Women stroke “ the Melody” of the word “ husband” and consider themselves “ Royal.” But at Calvary, to be royal is to be humiliated, the symbols of royalty having been transformed into symbols of ridicule by Christ’s executioners. Dickinson’s ambivalence toward marriage is evident in her letters. One frequently-quoted passage in particular, from a letter addressed to Susan Gilbert, describes feelings similar to those expressed in “ Title Divine.” Dickinson, then about twenty-two years old, wrote: How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden whose days are fed with gold. . . but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen f lowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet f lowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but — dew? No, they will cry for

sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace — they know that the man of noon, is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. . . . It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up. (Letter 93) The extreme discrepancy that Dickinson perceived between male and female power is evident in these lines. The male “ sun” is ubiquitous. He has freedom to move through the sky and dominion over all living things, including the “ scathed” female “ blossoms” that have neither mobility nor power.

The image of a male lover as a potentially overpowering, indifferent, and life-depleting “ sun” and the woman as a frail flower persists for years in Dickinson’s letters and poems. In the “ Master” letters, the poet refers to herself as “ Daisy.” In addition, there are poems such as “ The Daisy follows soft the Sun” (Poem 106), in which she depicts that extreme dominant-submissive relation. Because Dickinson so often felt that there was little spiritual nourishment available to women as Christians or as wives, and because the tone of several lines in the poems is heavily ironic, it is possible to read the wives in “ Title divine” as being fools for stroking the melody, for not realizing they are being mocked. 4 At the same time, the resonances of sacred words surround all the human figures in the poem with an aura of virtue and spiritual glory. The melody stroked by the women saying “ My Husband” is pitched in that “ Key of Calvary” which, for Dickinson, is loud with both beauty and fraud. The image of the bloody sacrifice that results in eternal life for the believer is peculiarly appropriate to the circumstances of the wives of Dickinson’s time. The images could suggest the blood that is

shed in childbirth. A woman who consented to marriage in the mid-nineteenth century consented to risk, since the mortality rate for women in childbirth was high. A woman taking the risk of “ bearing a man’s child” gave that man a kind of immortality, an immortality in which she was not believed to share. During Dickinson’s time it was generally believed that a woman’s body was little more than the soil in which a man’s seed was planted (Homans 153-157).

And, of course, the child would have the man’s name, imparting to him another sort of immortality. So, the wife’s “ Title divine,” her power to be “ the Resurrection and the Life,” made it her destiny to sacrifice her life (whether literally or figuratively) to gain immortality for her husband, just as Christ’s “ divine titles” made it his destiny to be sacrificed to save mankind. In works like “ That I did always love,” and “ Title divine” Dickinson attacks the attitudes underlying social power structures and does so by employing the very tropes conventionally used to maintain them. No matter what posture she assumes with respect to authority, however, she is not often able to feel entirely free of the constraints that authority places upon her, and a tinge of despair is also evident in much of her work. 5 To explore the reasons for Dickinson’s ironic view of victory and for her subsequent despair in “ Title divine,” we need to turn our attention away from the wives who are “ Stroking the Melody” and to look instead at the “ Title divine” of the woman-poet about whom the word “ wife” is used figuratively. Dickinson tells us that the “ Title divine — is mine.” Hers is clearly not a worldly title; it is something intangible, transcendent. But even if the “ Title divine” is more glorious, both aesthetically and morally, than any the material world has to

offer, it is no great consolation for Dickinson. To wait for the next life is perhaps never to find heaven at all. Dickinson has also told us that “ Heaven is so far of the Mind” (Poem 370) that no such place can be assumed to exist beyond the mind. The “ Title divine” may therefore be a fraud. She has attained a moral and intellectual victory, an internal victory of some kind, but no material sense of fulfillment.

However, we do get the feeling that Dickinson values the moral victory, even if true happiness (which we learn from other poems and from her letters is something she craves) is unattainable. We have still not explored all of what the “ Title divine” is for Dickinson. In “ Title divine,” as in many of Dickinson’s most intriguing poems, metaphor is stacked upon metaphor. The tropes of Christ’s sacrifice and divinity are also descriptive of Dickinson’s sense of identity as a woman and poet. To be a poet, she may be understood to have sacrificed her life in Amherst society and the possibility of being a wife and mother. As the church and the human soul are considered the “ brides” of Christ, Dickinson is the bride of poetry. She is “ the Word made flesh,” a Christ figure whose father in heaven is poetry rather than Deity. Her “ Title divine,” then, is that of poet. Through poetry she is “ the Resurrection and the Life.” She has the power to give life to language. In a letter to T. W. Higginson, Dickinson asks “ Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (Letter 260). She is one, like Christ (but “ without the Sign”), whose greatness is not recognized, who would (should she reveal herself) be vulnerable to mockery and ostracism in a society unable and perhaps unwilling to understand her. We can also read the “ Title divine” as being a

title to love and “ The Wife — without the Sign!” as being a figure for and statement of enduring devotion.

The “ Title divine” is the true love the poet feels, even though she does not have the “ Sign,” a ring or marriage license to show as material proof of her commitment. Suzanne Juhasz has elaborated on this point: When do you “ hold — Garnet to Garnet — / Gold to Gold — “? Because this sounds like a description of wedding rings, of, consequently, a double-ring ceremony, the phrase probably modifies the swoon that God sends to women, so that swoon can be read as symbolic, or symptomatic, of the ordinary woman’s response to a man, a husband, to marriage. Thus, being a wife without the sign would be being a wife without the ring — and without the swoon. No church wedding: no crown. Another sort of marriage. (The Undiscovered Continent 112) But whether we read Dickinson as poet, lover, or both, she endures the pain of making sacrifices to what or to whom she loves in secret. The missing “ Sign” is a double metaphor. It is the mocking, public sign that labels the cross and becomes a metaphor for the position of a wife in society or for the woman-poet. It also suggests a wedding ring — the public “ Sign” for marriage. If we consider these figures to represent Dickinson as a poet, the “ Wife — without the Sign” becomes the woman-poet who has received no public recognition. Since women writers were frequently subject to ridicule, being “ without the sign” has its appeal. We see the poet being sacrificed silently in the name of some greater cause that operates beyond the ken of average mortals. But, once again, because she persistently aligns herself with Christ, the pains and humiliations experienced in being the “

Empress of Calvary” are nevertheless indicative of power, virtue, and superiority.

Dickinson’s use of other Christian images in “ Title divine” reinforces her several metaphorical premises. The image of “ the Crown” carries a particularly heavy load of meaning. The contrast between Christ’s mortal crown of thorns and his heavenly crown is often the subject of Protestant hymns. Below are two examples: See from his head, his hands, his feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down: Did e’er such love and sorrow meet; Or thorns compose so rich a crown? The images in this hymn give us an explicit description of what the crown of thorns signified to Puritans. It represented not only sacrifice but love and sorrow too, primary characteristics for both wife and poet in “ Title divine.” Christ’s crown of thorns is at last exchanged for a glorious crown of divinity when he ascends into heaven: All hail the power of Jesus’ name,

Let angels prostrate fall; Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of all. Like Christ, both wife and woman-poet must wear a crown of thorns, must bear humiliation and a lack of recognition for their virtues, at least in their mortal lives. But both are possessed of divine power (albeit unacknowledged) and are heirs to the “ royal diadem.” The symbol of the crown of thorns deifies the act of sacrifice and sanctifies pain and humiliation. Christ, the most loving and perfect human being who ever existed, was forced to wear the crown of thorns by a society that perceived him (as it would perceive a great female poet) as a threat to its power structures. The crown, then, is also a symbol of guilt, a guilt by which the



Puritans felt burdened. Superimposing the image of the crown of thorns onto the image of the wife, Dickinson imbues woman's fate (as wife or poet) with great value and dignity. At the same time, she points an accusing finger at a society that crowns her with thorns. The lines "Born — Bridalled — Shrouded / In a Day — / Tri Victory" are bitterly ironic. By inserting the image of a woman being "Bridalled" (as one would bridle a horse) between the facts of birth and death and by calling this "Victory," Dickinson makes a tightly compressed poetic statement. The rebellious tone of these lines is enhanced by her employment of the word bridal as a verb. As Barton St. Armand observes, Dickinson "rightfully `bridles,' or scornfully rebels, against her fate" (146).

Images of rebellion against Satan and against death and of Christ's final victory abound in Protestant sermons, and especially in hymns. For example: Hail! Mighty Jesus; how divine Is thy victorious sword! The stoutest rebel must resign, At thy commanding word. There is a double significance in the word "victorious" just as in the image of the crown. Christ's crucifixion is a victory for mankind because it offers a chance for immortality. But for Christ himself, the real victory will come on Judgment Day, when he will lead the forces of good to eradicate evil forever, when he will consign all good souls to heaven and all evil ones to hell. The pain of crucifixion is enough, however, to shake the faith even of the Son of God. The heavenly victory seems remote to him when he cries out to God from the cross, "why hast thou forsaken me?" The wife's ultimate victory in "Title divine" (whether she is interpreted as being woman or woman-poet), like Christ's victory, seems remote because no immediate reward is in sight and because the pain

endured in obtaining that victory is so great. The final line of the “ Title divine,” “ Is this — the way?” asks “ is this the way to stroke `the melody’? Did the tone of my voice express the proper degree of smug contentment when I said `My Husband’?” Interpreted in this manner, the line sounds sarcastic and supports the idea that the wives with “ the Sign” are being mocked by the poet. But it is also possible to interpret the line as echoing Christ’s words, “ I am the way, the Truth, and the life,” in which case we hear the poet asking, “ is this the way to salvation? Is the sacrifice of marriage really the way for a woman to find fulfillment in life?” A third possibility exists as well.

Underneath the irony and uncertainty, the speaker may be practicing her articulation of the word “ Husband” with a certain smugness of her own — as the secret bride of poetry. All three readings of this line are supported by the text. Dickinson’s restatement of religious figures frees them from any single interpretation; their connotations multiply and contradict one another, remaining fluid within poems and between poems. from “ Emily Dickinson’s Poetics of Translation.” Emily Dickinson Journal Vol. III. 1 (1996). Online Source: [http://www. colorado. edu/EDIS/journal/articles/III. 1. Hosman. html](http://www.colorado.edu/EDIS/journal/articles/III.1.Hosman.html)