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**SISTERS IN SEARCH:  
EMILY DICKINSON'S AFFINITIES  
WITH THE TRADITION OF CHRISTLIKE WOMEN IN LITERATURE**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted to the Graduate School and Research**

**in Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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**August 1999**

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**Title: Sisters In Search: Emily Dickinson's Affinities With the Tradition of Christlike Women in Literature**

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**Emily Dickinson's art and life may be better understood in the context of a long literary tradition of Christlike female characters who function as guides, saviors, prophets, or role models to others within the texts and potentially to readers. A female prototype for these characters is the folktale figure of the sister who seeks and saves her brothers (Tale Type 451, recorded by Grimm as "The Twelve Brothers"). Dickinson has complex affinities with this subversive tradition of female heroism and with early Celtic Christianity and biblical feminism. Individual Dickinson poems parallel the characterizations and situations of Christlike women found in literary works by several of her predecessors and contemporaries as well as by certain twentieth-century writers. Dickinson's wide reading undoubtedly contributed to these striking similarities, even though there is little evidence indicating whether any given poem was a direct response to some other literary text.**

After describing the development and gradual suppression of feminist elements in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, this study examines Christlike heroines in works by Shakespeare, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George MacDonald, Lucy Larcom, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, noting the various thematic parallels with Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's prophetic vocation is then traced in her poems describing the speaker's dedication to her calling, her commitment to a central mystical relationship, and her reaching out to others through artistic dramatization of her spiritual quest. Finally, the continuing tradition of Christlike women in literature is explored in works by D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Thornton Wilder, Ernest Gaines, Tillie Olsen, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

Dickinson is illuminated by the tradition and illuminates it for those who come after her. Her remarkable integration of life and art, of reading and writing, has profound interdisciplinary significance. Through the literary portrayals of women in search of integrity and community, the vision of female heroism has endured, facilitating revisionist rather than radical responses to social inequalities. Part of Dickinson's multifaceted genius lies in her embodiment of such a response and her creative articulation of thoughts and emotions shared by many others.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE ROOTS OF FEMALE HEROISM IN RELIGION AND FOLKLORE

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be made known.

Matthew 10:26

Good to know, and not tell,  
Best, to know and tell,  
Can one find the rare Ear  
Not too dull--

Emily Dickinson, #842

Emily Dickinson's art and life may be better understood in the context of a long literary tradition of Christlike female characters who function as guides, saviors, prophets, or role models to others in the texts and potentially to readers. These characters may alternatively be called "sisters in search" in honor of their female prototype, the folktale figure of the sister who seeks and saves her brothers (Tale Type 451, recorded by Grimm as "The Twelve Brothers"). They are courageous, loving, unconventional, rejected, forgiving, and in some sense triumphant, earning the admiration of other characters, and embodying the possibility of female heroism. Since the tradition of Christlike women in literature is not widely recognized, it is necessary to trace its development in order to explore Emily Dickinson's complex affinities with it, as reflected in her poems and letters.

It may be helpful to clarify certain essential terms juxtaposed in this study. The phrase "Christlike women" is used rather than "Christ-figures" because the latter might suggest the presence of direct allegory or incorrectly imply that the authors or characters being considered were formally associated with Christian institutions. However, all of the writers included here had some familiarity with the Bible, an influence observable within the literary texts regardless of the personal beliefs of the authors or their readers. Whatever their theological views, these writers created female characters sharing traits of Jesus that are discernible from the Gospel texts in much the same way any literary character's traits can be determined. On the other hand, the folktale sister of the twelve brothers was probably not known to some of these authors, but her story reveals that the form of female heroism they depict has long existed in the popular imagination.

As for the concept of feminism, it is here used in its simplest denotative sense to mean the belief in equality of the sexes in all realms of life, and action supporting that goal. Although the actual term "feminism" was not used until relatively recent times, historian Gerda Lerner has amply demonstrated in The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy that the affirmation of women's abilities and merits and the efforts to increase their status and opportunities have existed in many forms throughout centuries of Western culture. To her own surprise,

Lerner found that "religion was the primary arena on which women fought for hundreds of years for feminist consciousness" (viii). Even more crucial to the present study is her finding that women have repeatedly been forced to reinvent wheels, rediscovering and elaborating ideas already developed by other women unknown to them, and struggling against the same obstacles to female education, expression, and public activity that their foremothers faced (220-21). It is in this sense that one can speak of the historical suppression of feminism, gradually overcome as some women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to learn more of their heritage and organize themselves to promote social change.

Partly because feminism is often mistakenly assumed by both its supporters and detractors to be a very recent development in human history, the question of whether men and women can be role models for one another has been much debated in academia and in society at large. Thus, some Christians have argued against the equality of the sexes by asking how any woman can represent Christ. In response, some feminists question whether Jesus or any other male figure can be a role model for women. Both sides are admirably answered by Carolyn Heilbrun in Reinventing Womanhood, where she points out that female pioneers in many fields have had to follow male role models if only by default. Many famous women have had supportive fathers who encouraged their gifts and helped them to refuse stereotypical

feminine roles prescribed by society. That women can adopt male models without taking on “the meaner aspects of competitive male behavior” is already historical reality (Heilbrun 97); it need not be further debated.

If Christ and other male figures can be role models for women, it logically follows that women can serve as role models for men; yet religious and secular circles alike are often blind to this possibility. As Northrop Frye argued throughout The Educated Imagination, a primary function of literature is to educate the imagination. Women’s opportunities to be spiritual seekers, teachers, and leaders have been severely limited, yet these possibilities have remained hidden in the human imagination, resurfacing in folklore, poetry, and fiction, and from time to time becoming actualized in reform movements. The archetypal figure represented by the sister who voluntarily saves her brothers at great personal cost is, as we shall see in detail, a striking expression of this feminist consciousness. Not only is she a female savior-figure for her brothers, but she is a potential role model for men who read or hear her story in the real world where they are the ones with more power than their sisters.

Few feminist literary critics have given much attention to the religious roots of feminism in Western culture. Conversely, scholarly advocates of biblical feminism are rarely literary critics, nor are they as widely known as feminist theologians representing other cultural traditions in which the

authority of religious institutions receives more emphasis than the authority of scriptural texts. Radical feminist theology and spirituality often develop in reaction to a monolithic concept of traditional religion as "the Church" or "the faith." Revisionist feminists, on the other hand, claim the right--even the responsibility--to reinterpret texts and redefine truth and error for themselves, by much the same reasoning that motivated earlier reformers--except that many reformers in the past did not extend such rights and responsibilities to women. Because women's voices have been silenced and forgotten in most traditions, although in different ways for different reasons, Lerner's research revealing women's revisionist writings throughout the centuries has truly revolutionary implications.

In the case of Dickinson scholarship, a small number of critics--notably Karl Keller, Jane Donahue Eberwein, and most recently Beth Maclay Doriani--have fortunately begun to integrate feminist and religious approaches to the poet's work. This integration can be strengthened with insights from various other critics who recognize the importance of Dickinson's extensive reading--including, above all, the King James Version of the Bible--even though many of these critics do not explore her reading from a feminist perspective. In the case of Dickinson herself, she seems to have found some of the support she needed for her vocation as female poet-prophet through reading, but reinvented the rest. When we recognize her

far-reaching conscious and unconscious cultural affinities, Dickinson appears increasingly rational and creative, rather than pathologically fragile.

Part of Emily Dickinson's multifaceted genius lies in integrating the strands of biblical and literary feminism more closely than most twentieth-century scholars have yet done. Thus, she not only provides rewarding material for interdisciplinary feminist and cultural studies, but also in some ways anticipates their approach to a better understanding of human experience. Dickinson has strong affinities with early Celtic Christianity, with feminist folktales, and with the biblical feminist tradition, all of which have been largely overlooked by her critics. Furthermore, individual Dickinson poems parallel the characterizations and situations of Christlike women in literature not only of her predecessors and contemporaries, but also of certain twentieth-century writers. All these affinities appear the more striking insofar as Dickinson herself may have been unaware of some of her cultural precursors. However, her passionate love of reading undoubtedly enhanced her capacity to "dwell in Possibility" and "gather Paradise" (Poem #657).

Thus, the unique contribution of this study lies in tracing the tradition of Christlike women in literature, in which suppressed feminist elements of the Judeo-Christian heritage resurface, particularly Emily Dickinson's use and transformation of that tradition. Her interests in the Bible, in women

writers, and in the minute details of women's experience converge in her art. Many Dickinson poems can be read as a gloss or re-articulation of themes, concepts, and situations found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, early Celtic Christianity, feminist folktales, and well-known literary texts. Not only is she illuminated by the tradition, but she illuminates it for those who come after her.

Accordingly, the opening chapter explores the roots of female heroism by summarizing the development and subsequent suppression of feminist elements in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. A brief survey of positive biblical images of women is followed by an examination of the Gospels' portrayals of Christ, especially his teaching and behavior concerning women. The folktale character of the sister who seeks and saves her brothers is presented as a significant survival of the feminist elements of early Christianity combined with those of pre-Christian Celtic and Germanic cultures, despite the gradual increase of dualistic misogyny in the mainstream Christian Church. The sister is seen as a prototype for subsequent Christlike women in literature. Through these sisters in search of integrity and community, the vision of female heroism has endured.

## Positive Images of Women in the Hebrew Scriptures

Riches and honor are with me; yea, durable riches and righteousness.  
My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold;  
and my revenue than choice silver.

Proverbs 8:18-19

Rich! 'Twas Myself--was rich--  
To take the name of Gold--  
And Gold to own--in solid Bars--  
The Difference--made me bold--

Dickinson, #454

Much disagreement exists among feminists today as to whether and how the Judeo-Christian sacred writings can empower women, even though women have explored these questions for centuries. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is always described with male pronouns and is most often perceived in masculine roles such as king, lawgiver, father, Lord of hosts. However, several female images for God are also scattered through these texts. Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, Leonard Swidler, and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, among others, have compiled and commented on these feminine images, of which the most prominent are God-as-Mother and the figure of Wisdom. The latter is not considered to be a separate divinity, although she is repeatedly and clearly personified as a woman, more desirable than rubies and gold. Since men enjoyed greater power and status than women in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, it is noteworthy that such female imagery for God appears at all.



Furthermore, Genesis 3:28, much cited by twentieth-century feminists, recounts that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Although Israelite monotheism sought to replace polytheistic religions honoring many gods and goddesses, it continued to recognize that males and females alike reflected the divine image. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a scholar of ancient Near Eastern religions, there is no evidence that the worship of a single Great Goddess ever existed in the region. The goddesses of Sumerian civilization had been increasingly marginalized over time, a trend which seems to reflect and model the gradual marginalization of women in human society (43-44). The inferior social position of women was already taken for granted before Hebrew monotheism came into being; it is never justified on religious grounds in the Hebrew Scriptures. Nor do any of the texts invoke the story of Adam and Eve in order to support the subordination of women, although St. Paul and some subsequent Christian thinkers have done so (see Frymer-Kensky 120-29). The Reformist tradition into which Emily Dickinson was born laid great emphasis on the close reading of biblical texts and accordingly challenged some misogynist elements of earlier Christian thought, even though it created other difficulties for women in the process.

The advent of monotheism raised complex issues that were to be differently addressed within the various branches of Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the one God YHWH tends to continue the functions elsewhere associated with male divinities, whereas many matters formerly under the jurisdiction of goddesses are said to be of human origin: agriculture, arts, crafts, sciences (Frymer-Kensky 108-17). Sexuality is included in this secularization of culture; it is neither evil nor sacred. We read of God's arm, right hand, back, and tears, but there is no phallic imagery, despite the use of masculine pronouns. Even in the marriage metaphors for God and Israel, found in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, there is little explicitly sexual imagery associated with the husband figure. Although sexuality is the subject of numerous laws, and monogamous marriage is approved by God, Frymer-Kensky concludes that the sacred texts do not address the great force of sexual attraction, capable of overwhelming other concerns and even disrupting families, the social fabric, and all of civilization. The great exception is the Song of Songs, an idyll of romantic love transcending societal restrictions, in which the great power of love is fully recognized. On the whole, the Hebrew Bible falls short of replacing advanced polytheism with an alternate vision integrating sexuality into a religious view of the universe (197-98).

Although women are often overlooked and sometimes exploited within the biblical records, it is nonetheless possible for women to attain positions of leadership. Among these are the three prophetesses, Miriam, Deborah, and

Huldah. The biblical precedent for female prophecy (in the sense of speaking divinely revealed truth) was publicly emphasized during Dickinson's lifetime by such women as Lydia Maria Child and Sarah Josepha Hale (Dorani 10-11). Both Miriam and Deborah, as Dorani points out, express themselves in song, supporting the common nineteenth-century association of prophecy and poetry (3). The less familiar story of Huldah, in II Kings 22, is perhaps the most relevant of the three to the present study. During the reign of the energetic reformer King Josiah, the high priest discovers an old book of the Law, believed by many to have been part of the present book of Deuteronomy. He presents it to the King, who is disturbed to realize how greatly Israel strays from these laws. In order to consult YHWH about the book's authority, they appeal to the prophetess Huldah. She validates it as the word of God and foretells dire disaster for evildoers, including the destruction of Jerusalem after Josiah's death. The King accepts Huldah's message and renews the nation's covenant with God to obey his laws. This marks the first official recognition of any of the present Judeo-Christian Scriptures as authoritative.

This story is striking for several reasons. As Leonard Swidler points out, it is remarkable that the King and the high priest appeal to a woman even though they have specifically been striving to stamp out worship of foreign deities (88). This implies that their objection is to polytheism versus

monotheism, not to the possibility of any association between femaleness and God. Furthermore, Huldah, like Deborah, is a married woman, so there is no implication that active sexuality conflicts with her role as the honored prophetess who can best interpret the will of God. Finally, the woman Huldah is recorded as being the first authorizer of Scripture, yet in subsequent centuries, women have rarely been acknowledged as messengers of God, or invited to gatherings such as the Council of Nicaea, which made more recent decisions as to what should be regarded as official Scripture. Although Huldah's story has been de-emphasized by religious institutions, it has at least been preserved, providing a precedent for other women with similar vocations who might rediscover this account.

Two other outstanding women, Ruth and Esther, are more widely known because their names serve as the titles of the books containing their stories. Ruth is significant for the present study in that she chose to follow a God whom she experienced through the faith and life of another woman, Naomi. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are seldom the best of friends, so the close relationship between Ruth and Naomi is remarkable. Phyllis Trible emphasizes that Ruth has not only broken with her original family, country, and faith; she has committed herself to caring for an old woman rather than searching for a husband, in a world where women's lives depend upon men. No God has promised Ruth a blessing, such as Abraham received

when he was called out of his native land. Tribble concludes, "There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel" (173). When the women reach Naomi's homeland, Ruth sets about providing for her mother-in-law by gleaning the grain left behind by reapers. She soon attracts the attention of Boaz, the owner of the field and a distant relative of Naomi's family. At the end of the harvest, Naomi advises Ruth to wash and dress in her finest clothes and go to the threshing-floor where Boaz is sleeping, and do whatever he says. Ruth does so, requesting his protection and taking more initiative than Naomi had suggested. Tribble points out that Ruth echoes the complimentary words Boaz had spoken to her earlier, directly implying that he is to be the channel of the divine blessing he had invoked for her (184). Boaz sends her away very early in the morning and goes out to make arrangements for their marriage. They become the great-grandparents of King David and the ancestors of Jesus.

Esther is another very resourceful woman, still remembered during the Feast of Purim for her great courage. The Jewish bride of the Persian King Ahaserus, she wins enduring fame by risking her life to come unbidden into the King's presence and plead for mercy for her people, against whom the evil advisor Haman has conspired. Lesser known saviour-figures include the wise woman of Tekoa, who persuades King David to forgive his erring son, thereby restoring peace to the land (II Samuel 14), and the widow of

Zarephath, who opens her home to the fleeing prophet Elijah (I Kings 17). In short, the Hebrew Scriptures contain several courageous, loving, unselfish women who take action to benefit themselves and others, in accordance with the will of God.

**My Sister, My Spouse: The Unique Vision of the Song of Songs**

I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey.

The Song of Songs 5:1

Come slowly--Eden!  
Lips unused to Thee--  
Bashful--sip thy Jessamines--  
As the fainting Bee--

Reaching late his flower,  
Round her chamber hums--  
Counts his nectars--  
Enters--and is lost in Balms.

Dickinson, #211

The Song of Songs, a magnificent collection of dramatic love poems, is unique among the Hebrew Scriptures for its exuberant celebration of romantic love, sexuality, and natural beauty. The man and the woman speak with equal delight of their love, each openly describing the other in erotic imagery. Love is not determined by the possession of worldly goods, or the wishes of relatives (there is some indication that the woman's brothers are displeased with the romance). Nor is there any mention of the desire for

offspring. Although such an idyllic relationship is admittedly rare in Scripture, the Song of Songs is evidence against the view that romantic love was never experienced or imagined in a positive light until the twelfth century. The Song is a most important element in the minority feminist strand within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Not surprisingly, its influence is apparent upon numerous female mystics as well as upon Emily Dickinson.

According to Phyllis Trible, the Song is composed of five major sections which contain cyclical patterns recalling similar cyclical designs in the story of Adam and Eve. She offers a detailed analysis of the work's themes and images as a contrast to those of the Genesis 2 story; whereas the first man and woman were divided through disobedience, the man and woman in the Song's garden of love are united in harmony. Trible's study emphasizes that in this poetic masterpiece, if not elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, sexual love is redeemed and celebrated (164-65). A superb translation and commentary by Ariel and Chana Bloch reinforces the interpretation of the Song as a unified sequence, whereas another sensitive reading from a very different perspective is available in Marcia Falk's version, which treats the Song as a collection of thirty-one entirely separate lyrics.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of their disagreement as to the best method of dividing the text of the Song, these scholars concur that it portrays an extraordinarily joyous egalitarian relationship.

Especially significant is a phrase often repeated by the lover: "My sister, my spouse." These words suggest that the speaker sees the woman as a being somewhat like himself, not a totally mysterious Other, to use a phrase originally popularized by Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Such a bride can be known and respected as a friend as well as a lover. She can be loved as a sexual being and for other qualities simultaneously.

Ironically, this splendid portrayal of love was retained as official Scripture largely because it could be read as an allegory of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, or between Christ and the church, although there is little in the text directly supporting either traditional interpretation. Feminist critic Virginia Mollenkott suggests the Song be read symbolically rather than allegorically, with an awareness of multiple possible meanings. To her, "the Song of Solomon literally celebrates romantic equal-partner love and figuratively depicts not only the love between Christ and the church but also the love relationship within the godhead" (72); that is, between the male and female dimensions of God. This interpretation may seem startling until one realizes there is little save a reader's prejudices to determine which of the lovers represents divinity and which represents humanity. Symbolically, either or both might be interpreted as divine, even though the Judeo-Christian deity has commonly been regarded as male, leading to the converse tendency to see men as more godlike than women. A substantial minority of



thinkers through the ages have suggested the inadequacy of this view. Mollenkott has surveyed several orthodox Christian writers, ranging from the second-century Church fathers to the seventeenth-century mystics, who built upon the biblical imagery of God as female, prior to the organized women's movement (8-14). For example, Clement of Alexandria portrays God as a maternal figure nursing humanity (8), and Anselm of Canterbury often refers to "mother Jesus" (10). Mollenkott notes that Lady Julian of Norwich (to be further discussed later in this chapter) "developed the image of a Christian feminist divinity more fully, more centrally, and more creatively than any other medieval author" (10). Such imagery supports the concept of a minority feminist tradition within orthodox Christianity, continuing from the Bible to modern times.

In contrast, the patriarchal mainstream of Western culture has presented men as the normal or standard representatives of humanity for centuries, while woman is commonly described as the Other. According to the male recorders of culture, woman is a mystery to be feared. She may symbolize evil or the temptation to evil and may be associated with fickleness and unpredictability. Alternatively, woman may be a mystery that is adored. Thus, goddesses have frequently been worshipped in societies that oppress real women. Frymer-Kensky describes male-female dualism as a major element in ancient Hellenistic thought. Women were seen as natural and

untamed, men as civilized (203). Nature itself was seen as an unruly female, to be tamed to meet human needs (214-15). Although the inferior social position of women long preceded Hellenistic dualism, Frymer-Kensky concludes that the belief in the innate inferiority of women's nature developed as a part of the general Hellenistic disdain for female sexuality and material existence. Thus, it was in the Greco-Roman period that the conscious justification of separate spheres for men and women arose (Frymer-Kensky 210).

Dualism seems very evident in the portrayals of the Greek goddesses. On one hand there were the virgin goddesses--Athena, who was gifted in the arts of peace and war, and Artemis, the goddess of the moon and of hunting. In contrast, there was Aphrodite, the beautiful goddess of erotic love, apparently respected for very little else. In subsequent literature and history, woman is sometimes admired as an asexual being for her wisdom and skills, or she may be adored as an object of passion even while being ignored as a subject, a human being with her own thoughts and feelings. Woman may be honored as a mother, even as a virgin mother, for from the child's point of view, the mother is not sexually available. But to say "my sister, my spouse" is to unite all these images. It is to recognize the other's common humanity without excluding the mystery of sexuality. Thus, the Song of Songs is

invaluable as an early example of feminist attitudes being reflected in creative literature.

Although the Song of Songs has been neglected by the religious mainstream still influenced by dualism, it has continued to enrich literary tradition. Numerous scholars have speculated that the Song of Songs itself may have been composed by a woman. The bride of the Song is mistreated by her brothers and abused by the watchmen of the city as she seeks her beloved. Similar portrayals of other men as hindering love's fulfillment occur frequently in women's writing, according to Annis Pratt (24-29). Pratt also observes that the true lover in women's literature is commonly associated with a "green world" of natural beauty, as in the Song of Songs, somewhat removed from cultural centers of power (16-24). Likewise, many happily married feminists in history have had atypical husbands, outside the mainstream of their society in various ways. Examples include the Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Fell Fox, Anne Finch, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, and Virginia Woolf. <sup>2</sup>

It is possible that the Song reflects the influence of Sumerian or Egyptian religions wherein a god and goddess, siblings and spouses, are honored together. The famous Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis is the prototype of such stories. Devotion to Isis was extremely widespread by the time of Christ, perhaps in reaction to the dualistic philosophies which had

influenced educated thinkers throughout the early Roman Empire.

Dissatisfaction with dualistic separation of the material and spiritual realms may also have contributed to the spread of Christianity.

### Re-Presenting the Divine: The Characterization of Jesus

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who . . . made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.

Philippians 2:5-7

As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind--

Dickinson, #1129

As explained earlier, Hebrew monotheism had involved a humanization or secularization of culture, including the secularization of sexuality and other physical realities (whereas polytheistic religions often had credited a particular deity with teaching each craft to humanity or governing a certain element of human life). In an opposing swing of the pendulum, the Christian myth of the Incarnation may be seen as a literal humanizing or secularizing of religion itself. If God is envisioned as becoming human and entering completely into the physical world, the former division of secular and sacred disappears. The secularization of religion

becomes a potential re-consecration of all of life. English-speaking culture has been much influenced by the King James Version's rendering of St. John's affirmation, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Although no English word exactly corresponds to the Greek "logos," the Word is in itself a profoundly evocative metaphor. A word is a unit of communication; for Christians, Christ is the supreme communication of what God is like. The Gospels' characterizations of Jesus present a relatively androgynous image of the divine, as a comparison with the Isis/Osiris myth helps to clarify.

The following summary of the Isis/Osiris story is adapted from Joan Chamberlain Engelsman's The Feminine Dimension of the Divine. Isis and Osiris, literally siblings and spouses, were the children of Nut the sky-goddess and Geb the earth-god (an intriguing reversal of Greek mythology's sky-father and earth-mother). Osiris civilized the world not by force but by persuasive speech. His wicked brother Set tricked him into lying down in a large chest, and Set slammed down the lid and threw the chest into the sea. In great grief, Isis searched for her husband throughout all the world. For a time she disguised herself and took service as a nursemaid at the court of Byblos. After she found Osiris's body, Set managed to cut it up and disperse the pieces, whereupon Isis embarked on another long and difficult search for her beloved. She at last restored Osiris to wholeness, but he became the king

of the dead in Egyptian mythology. Isis remained actively ruling over the created earth, more immediately available to humanity's prayers. Thus it is understandable that this religion would appear to be a goddess-dominated faith to Hebrew contemporaries. Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis, led a great battle against the wicked Set, who was captured and brought before the assembly of heaven. Isis forgave Set and let him go. Horus angrily tore the crown from her head, but the other deities made him return it. Isis is called Queen of Creation, the revealer of mysteries, the giver of laws, and the protector of the righteous (Engelsman 60-66).

Parallels between Christ and Osiris have long been observed, as well as with other dying gods, such as the Norse Balder, killed by the evil Loki. Likewise, some of the roles of Isis have been inherited by Mary, the mother of Jesus. In popular Catholicism, Mary has been seen as the merciful mediator, more approachable than God the Father. Yet it may be argued that Christ also resembles the figure of Isis. Christ seeks and saves the lost; Christ is the healer and restorer; Christ is non-violent and forgiving, even as Isis was merciful to Set. It is significant that the Pharaohs of Egypt, wielding power in the everyday world, were supposed to be incarnations of the revengeful Horus, whereas Isis had taken the form of a servant on earth--like Jesus and like the Greek goddess Demeter when she was mourning her daughter Persephone.

In Isis, the ancient world had already conceived of a divinity in female form who seeks out the suffering, who restores wholeness, who forgives instead of destroying. In Christ a similar figure is envisioned in masculine form. Because Jesus' maleness has often been used to denigrate females, at least two feminist writers have created parables concerning what might have happened if God had come to earth as a woman. In a poignant story titled "What Child Is This?" Mary Cartledge-Hayes imagines the shepherds coming to the stable only to find a distraught Joseph abandoning his family (16-17). When the visitors realize that Mary's holy child is a daughter, they too depart in horror, pausing to throw a burning torch into the thatched roof of the shelter. "After many generations, God in great wisdom, sent another child to the weary earth. This one's name would be Jesus. He, at least, would be permitted to speak" (17). More bitterly, Britt Johnston imagines twin Christ-children growing up together, equally brilliant and devout--but only the boy, Jesus, receives an education or any respectful attention as a religious teacher (22-23). The nameless sister is stoned to death the day after she anoints her brother with the precious ointment left for her long ago by the wise woman who had come with her male companion to see the infant children.

Both stories are reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's much cited account of "Shakespeare's sister," which similarly illustrates the misfortune and

ignominy that would have befallen a young woman with Shakespeare's genius (Room 48-50). All three tales raise disturbing questions about woman's invisibility in history. The devastating point of Cartledge-Hayes's tale is not so much that it might have happened, but that we would have no possible way of knowing if it in fact had happened--because it would not have been recorded. Human sexism easily accounts for the gender of the child born in the Gospel stories; divine sexism need not be invoked, favorably or unfavorably.

Even as a man, Jesus survives only three years after embarking upon his public ministry. Unlike many male deities of other mythologies, he stands for a completely different kind of leadership from what many men have chosen. Jesus holds no official position of masculine authority except that of a rabbi from an insignificant country village. He is neither a king nor a priest nor a military general nor a merchant prince nor an athletic hero, nor even, so far as the texts indicate, a husband or father. By not marrying, Jesus may well be deliberately rejecting various privileges of the male head of a household, rather than implying anything negative about sexuality. This choice may make it easier for his female disciples to see him as an understanding teacher and role model.

The Gospel texts characterize Jesus as an authoritative figure who is loving, humble, courageous, unconventional, rejected by many, and yet



ultimately triumphant. Clearly Jesus' speech and presence have a dramatic effect on those around him. Several of his disciples leave everything and follow him at once when he calls them. He is seen as a rabbi who teaches with an inner authority; people ask one another where he acquired such wisdom. Even the devils he casts out recognize him. Many people who are ill are certain he can help them; even foreigners such as the Roman centurion and the Syro-Phoenician woman hear of his reputation and seek his healing. The impulsive Peter at least temporarily trusts Jesus so much that he leaps from a boat to walk toward his Master on the sea. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate is deeply impressed with the exhausted man brought to trial, finding no fault at all with him. From childhood on, Jesus is a compelling figure.

Love is the hallmark of Jesus' teaching and ministry. The greatest commandment, he says, is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself" (Luke 10:27). He is continually moved by compassion for human suffering. He feeds hungry multitudes by multiplying the loaves and fishes. All who do the will of God are part of his family; they will be remembered at the Last Judgment for feeding the hungry and visiting those sick and in prison. Jesus loves women such as Mary Magdalene and Mary and Martha of Bethany, as well as his male disciples. "Love one another as I

have loved you," he says at the Last Supper--not "as I will love you by dying for you," but "as I have loved you" already. Christ's love is never characterized by neurotic masochism, although women and other disadvantaged groups are often encouraged to accept suffering as a means of imitating him. Rather, Jesus portrays God as a good shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep, an industrious housewife who searches diligently for her lost coin, a loving father who welcomes the returning prodigal son with open arms.

Except to some extent in John's Gospel, Jesus manifests striking humility, discouraging publicity about his miracles and de-emphasizing his personal position in the kingdom of heaven. Many have cited his birth to a poor woman in a small and struggling nation as evidence of his humility, yet surely the most graphic evidence appears in the story of the Temptation. Here, the devil's challenge to Jesus, as Dostoevsky recognized in the Grand Inquisitor parable in The Brothers Karamazov, is precisely the temptation to go back to being God the Omnipotent--to win over Jerusalem by a dramatic miracle, to bring the entire world under political subjection, to be the patriarchal stereotype so resented by modern feminists. Christ's rejection of that temptation represents the difficult decision to call people to change from the inside out. The implication is that no external reform, including feminist reform, can be permanent unless the inner attitudes of individuals change.

Jesus' courage is evident through his unconventionality as well as through his humility. He startles respectable people by associating with publicans, sinners, and Samaritans. He violates the Sabbath, condemns the moneychangers' customary business in the Temple, and revises the right of divorce permitted by Moses. He interacts freely with women, never treating them as second-class persons. Not only do women receive Christ's love, but they are equally called with men to be Christlike themselves in their relations with others of both sexes. Yet any woman who behaves as unconventionally as Jesus is certain to be criticized in secular and religious circles alike.

As a character who on his own authority speaks out against prevailing customs and beliefs, Jesus is unappreciated and rejected by many of his contemporaries. Betrayed by one of his close friends, he is cruelly executed, a more severe fate than the evils befalling most of the heroines considered in this study. Yet his influence does not end.

During his agony on the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is easier, one may respond, to forgive those who know not what they do than those who deliberately act in their own self-interest, to the harm of others. Nevertheless, Jesus emphasizes that God forgives us as we forgive one another. Much will be required of those to whom

much is given. It is easy to love one's friends, but Christ commands loving even one's enemies.

Finally, the Resurrection is the crucial element that transforms the Gospel story from tragedy to fairy tale (to borrow the title metaphor from Frederick Buechner's Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale). Christ triumphs at last over all the forces against him. In Northrop Frye's more formal terminology, the Gospel is a romance, a story of a hero of humble birth, dedicated to a difficult mission, seeming to fail, then overcoming evil and reigning over a new kingdom to be shared with all who will come to the celebration.

For the literary critic, Christ's mythic role as cultural hero is of central importance, although his historical and theological roles are intertwined with his mythic significance for many creative writers. To say the Resurrection is a myth is to recognize it as a symbol of universal needs and longings; to say it is history is to affirm that those needs are--or will be--met in the experience of the affirmer. A useful analogy may be made with another cultural hero, Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln is of mythic stature, part of the American myth in that he represents the ideals of freedom and equality, as well as the potential of the common people from whom he sprang. In contrast, little-known presidents such as Chester Arthur or Franklin Pierce are equally historical, but they are not part of the American myth, and few of

us remember much about them. The story of Jesus, like Lincoln's, has captured the imaginations of countless women as well as men; if it had not, its historicity would be beside the point. Our folklore and literature reflect the reality that both men and women have manifested the Christlike traits just discussed, despite patriarchal resistance to the possibility of female heroism.

### Women in the Gospels and Early Christianity

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Luke 1:52-53

I deem that I--with but a Crumb--  
Am Sovereign of them all--

Dickinson, #791

Since the argument of this study is based in part upon a feminist interpretation of the Gospels, it must be supported by some analysis of the interactions of Jesus with women, as well as his parables concerning women. Helpful introductions to this subject from a feminist perspective are Rachel Conrad Wahlberg's Jesus According to a Woman and Jesus and the Freed Woman; a more formal and comprehensive survey is Leonard Swidler's indispensable reference work, Biblical Affirmations of Women. Jesus never

makes his gender into a barrier of any kind for the women attracted by his teachings. On the contrary, he uses specifically female images to communicate the divine nature and activity. In his sorrow over Jerusalem he compares himself to a mother hen longing to shelter her chicks under her wing (Luke 13:34). He likens God to a woman who loses one of her precious coins and seeks for it throughout the house until she finds it ( Luke 15: 8-9). Again, the kingdom of heaven grows secretly and quietly like the leaven a woman takes and hides in three measures of meal to make the bread that sustains life (Matt.: 13:33). Jesus also compares the experience of those who choose to follow him to being born again, born of the Spirit, who is thus being figuratively described as female (John 3:2-8). Similarly, just before his death, Jesus comforts his disciples, saying, ". . . your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world" (John 16:21). Here the coming of the kingdom is likened to the successful delivery of a child. Both these birth images are remarkable in light of the taboo of uncleanness associated with childbirth under the Jewish laws.

The figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has strongly influenced Western culture's view of women, but the complexity of that influence is easily misunderstood by those unaware of how differently Mary has been

regarded by varying church traditions. Marina Warner's Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary traces the historical development of Mary's image, chiefly within the Catholic Church. Although Warner has assembled a fascinating wealth of information, her conclusions about Mary are essentially negative. To her, Mary's traditional characteristics--virginity, motherhood, meekness--only serve to tighten the bonds of all women (338). Rosemary Ruether's Mary: The Feminine Face of the Church offers a much more positive feminist perspective. Against the background of ancient Near Eastern goddesses and the Hebrew Scriptures, Ruether analyzes the character of Mary in the Gospels and in subsequent Catholic tradition. Unlike Warner, she also addresses the Protestant reaction against Mary and the "feminization of Christ" that appears to compensate for the lack of a central female figure in Protestant theology. "This feminization of Christ may have something to do with the secularization of public power in modern society," she explains (74). Since Jesus refuses to wield the public power usually possessed by males, he does not fit masculine stereotypes. Many men have been eager to hold secular power and leave religion to women, to the private, personal sphere of life. This same scenario is discussed at length by literary critic Ann Douglas in her now-classic but rather unsympathetic study, The Feminization of American Culture. There is still some reluctance to accept women as active

members of the clergy, even in those Protestant churches that officially allow their ordination. It seems that neither Mary's presence in Catholicism nor her comparative absence in Protestantism directly corresponds with external social equality for women.

Ruether's feminist interpretation of Mary, however, may well have been anticipated by other individual women who read the Gospel texts long before her. The God revealed in Jesus, she argues, does not create a hierarchy of leaders, but a community of equal persons who serve one another as Christ was a servant (84). Thus, Mary can symbolize the church as a community of subjugated people set free (86). Mary's song of rejoicing, the Magnificat, celebrates a new world in which the rich and proud are brought low and the poor and humble are exalted (Luke 1:46-55). The call to be servants may be a troubling paradox for women, slaves, or any group forced into servitude by others in their society, as Ruether points out (83). Yet Jesus says his followers are blessed if they voluntarily suffer for his sake and the Gospel's, not if they involuntarily suffer simply because someone else chooses to oppress them.

The great male Reformer Martin Luther anticipated some of Ruether's insights about Mary as a model for all Christians, not for her virginity or her motherhood, but for her faith. "The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God," declared Luther; "that God should become man is a greater miracle; but most



amazing of all is it that this maiden should credit the announcement that she . . . had been chosen to be the mother of God. . . . Had she not believed, she could not have conceived" (23). Luther, who himself left the monastery and married a former nun, further affirms,

Christ wished marriage to retain its honor alongside of the virginity of Mary. The virginity was concealed from the world; the marriage was proclaimed. . . . If one would praise virginity, splendid, but not to the disparagement of marriage. Virginity, marriage, and widowhood do not earn heaven. They enter into heaven through faith in this little child. (31)

In their different ways the sixteenth-century Reformer and the twentieth-century feminist communicate their visions of the same possibilities. Mary may symbolize the human potential for being united with God, yet simultaneously united with another human being--a possibility reflected in Emily Dickinson's poetry and in other literature--even though Mary's image has often been used to promote the opposite impression.

Ruether suggests that Mary, the mother of Jesus, may have received disproportionate attention in church tradition, to the neglect of other women who were faithful friends and disciples of Jesus (87). Chief among these is Mary Magdalene. All four Gospels report that women were the first to know of Christ's resurrection (or at least that he was gone from the tomb), and all

four name Mary Magdalene first among them. According to Luke 8, Mary Magdalene and other women sometimes accompanied Jesus and the other disciples in their travels, supporting the group out of their own financial resources. A longstanding tradition identifies Mary Magdalene with one of the sinful women forgiven by Jesus, but the biblical texts provide absolutely no evidence that she was ever a harlot. Luke mentions that Jesus cast seven devils out of her, but in most other cases Jesus' exorcism of devils is either taken literally or assumed to mean that he cured someone of epilepsy or mental illness. In her detailed analysis of this controversy, Susan Haskins records that a noted nineteenth-century Evangelical woman named Mrs. Balfour was among the first to deny publicly "that Mary Magdalene's malaise was anything other than psychological" (12-13). Whatever Mary's devils were, Jesus healed her, and she remains one of his best-known female followers.

To note that Jesus made his first resurrection appearances to women is not of course to claim a higher status for his female disciples, but he was certainly doing something unusual. It is possible that Jesus was deliberately testing his male disciples to see whether they would believe the women. The men are not criticized for disbelief; it is implied that the resurrection was after all sufficiently remarkable that anyone would have been surprised by it. Yet after these same disciples have seen Jesus, and their comrade Thomas

questions their story (John 20), he is labeled "doubting Thomas" forever after. Every Eastertide Christians condescend to poor Thomas for his lack of faith because he doubted the other men. That they doubted the women seems to be forgotten. It should be noted that women were not accepted as witnesses in a court of law, which may be why St. Paul does not include the women in his list of witnesses to the resurrection, even though he does mention some appearances not clearly described in the Gospels (I Corinthians 15: 3-8).

It is probable that Mary Magdalene's reputation was deliberately tarnished in the early centuries of the Church by those who wished to de-emphasize her position as a leading female disciple and friend of Jesus. Non-canonical writings such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Pistis Sophia honor Mary Magdalene as an intimate friend of Christ's who received special revelations from him, to the particular annoyance of Peter. Gnostic communities spoke openly of the feminine element of God and carried out their beliefs in equality in their social and political practice, as Elaine Pagels explains in The Gnostic Gospels (see Ch. III, 48-69). Clearly, it is not a new phenomenon that women have felt excluded from orthodox Christianity, and thus sought spiritual fulfillment among groups who respected women but were theologically questionable on other matters. In a vicious circle, the unorthodox beliefs of minority movements in turn would have made the orthodox Church feel justified in rejecting their emphasis on

gender equality along with their other views. Pagels does cite Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) as a striking exception to orthodox attitudes toward women. He compared God to a nursing mother, declared that men and women are equally made in God's image and should receive the same instruction, and compiled a list of admirable women drawn from classical antiquity as well as from Scripture (68). But Clement's attitude was largely forgotten as the Church went on to foster the tradition of Mary Magdalene as a penitent whore.

Mary and Martha of Bethany are two other friends of Jesus who have received renewed attention in recent years. Luke 10 tells of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet as a disciple--a privilege rabbis did not customarily grant women. Martha, very busy and overburdened with preparing the dinner, comes in to object that she is having to do this work alone, and asks Jesus to tell Mary to come and help her. Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken away from her. Traditionally Mary has been praised for being spiritual and intellectual, while Martha has been criticized for concerning herself with trivial housekeeping matters. By analogy it is often suggested that Christians of either sex should take heed and imitate Mary. While there may be an element of truth in this interpretation, feminist readers notice that Jesus is defending a woman's right to be a religious student, that Mary does not have to be confined to household drudgery just

because she is a woman. This point is likewise well taken. However, Wahlberg offers a broader and more compassionate feminist view, observing that although Mary has in theory been held up as a model, "the better part" has in fact been taken away from women in the church. Women have been encouraged to serve church suppers, make coffee, polish the brass, raise funds, and generally be busy about many things so that priests, deacons, and husbands are freed to do the really important work--the spiritually significant things, or the job that financially supports the family (According 79). No wonder women through the ages have been confused and resentful, for they have been made to follow Martha and then made to feel guilty for not resembling Mary.

Yet these sisters do not have to be made into stereotypes. Martha is doing exactly what is expected of women in her culture; Mary is being unconventional. Perhaps Jesus is not condemning Martha, but letting her know that he gives women a new choice. If Mary may come and talk with him, it follows that Martha may do so also. The story has been usefully juxtaposed with another account of this family, in John 11, when Jesus raises Lazarus from death (Wahlberg 76-78; Moltmann-Wendell 22-28). When their brother falls ill, Mary and Martha send for Jesus, but it is Martha this time who hastens down the road to talk with Jesus. Meanwhile, Mary remains at the house, attending to her duties as hostess to a large crowd of friends and

relatives mourning Lazarus' death. Soon Martha rushes back, moved and excited by Jesus' words, takes Mary aside, and tells her to go out and speak with him as well. Here is a striking reversal of the negative relationship between the sisters glimpsed through Luke's story: Mary can perform domestic activities when necessary; Martha talks with Jesus and wishes her sister to hear what he is saying.<sup>3</sup>

Another significant figure for feminist readers is the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman whose daughter is healed by Jesus, according to Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28. This nameless woman is apparently the only person credited with persuading Jesus to change his mind. Strangely, Jesus at first ignores and then indirectly rejects her pleas in behalf of her daughter who lies at home tormented by a demon. Many explanations have been offered for Jesus' uncharacteristic harshness to this woman. It could be that Jesus is exhausted and reluctant at the moment to demonstrate his powers and attract crowds. Mark says he had gone into a house, but could not be hidden; Matthew implies that they are walking along the road, and the disciples want him to tell the woman to stop following them and calling out for help. Others suggest that the theme of the story is that Jesus' mission is to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews--as Jesus himself may be realizing during this encounter. Still others, uncomfortable with the idea of his

growing in wisdom and understanding during his adult ministry, feel his coolness is simply a test of faith, for he commends the mother for her faith.

Certainly one of the writer's themes may indeed be that Jesus came for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. But this explanation is insufficient when we contrast the story with another case of Jesus healing a Gentile from a distance. Earlier, in Matthew 8, a Roman centurion humbly trusts that Jesus is able to heal his servant without even coming to his house. Jesus promptly does so, warmly praises the centurion, and makes an extended point about outsiders entering into God's kingdom while the children of Israel will be cast out. Why would he respond favorably to the powerful centurion, but test the Syro-Phoenician woman's faith with apparent rejection?

Wahlberg believes that through this woman's courage and wit Jesus fully recognized the prejudice of his people for what it was and came into a deeper awareness of his mission to all people everywhere (According 13-14). Yet even Wahlberg has not emphasized that this is a woman speaking up in behalf of her daughter--a Gentile girl-child--doubly unimportant. This is without precedent anywhere in Scripture. To the mother, her daughter matters, and she will not give up easily. The woman differs from many mothers in literature and in life who passively accept trouble or blame themselves whether or not they are at fault. She does not say, "I should have

taken better care of my child, and this would not have happened." She is actively seeking help for a problem she knows she cannot solve.

She is not diverted from her purpose when Jesus says it is not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs. With an audacity akin to that of Jane Eyre or Emily Dickinson's personae, she responds: "Truth, Lord, but the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." You can call us names if you like, but heal my daughter anyway! Then Jesus answers her prayer: "For this saying, your daughter is healed."

It is very likely that this story is one inspiration for Emily Dickinson's frequent image of the breadcrumb as a precious morsel of grace vouchsafed to her, especially in Poem #791 ("God gave a Loaf to every Bird--/ But just a Crumb--to Me--").<sup>4</sup> In several other poems, a "Lady" offers crumbs of bread to a bird, whose grateful singing in some cases suggests that the poet identifies with both the bird and its benefactor.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the much-cited "Hope is the thing with feathers" (#254) celebrates the gallantry of the bird who never pauses in its song to ask for a crumb at all.

Luke's Gospel does not tell the story of the Gentile mother, which is not surprising, for of all the Evangelists, Luke portrays Jesus as particularly sympathetic toward women. It is therefore interesting that Luke alone includes a parable encouraging persistence in prayer. In Luke 18 a widow keeps coming to an unjust judge until he gives in and settles her case because



she wearies him so. Like the Syro-Phoenician woman, and unlike the Roman centurion, she has no power on earth but her courage and the rightness of her cause. Perhaps Emily Dickinson saw precedents for her less flattering images of God in the unjust judge or in Jesus' seeming indifference to the suppliant mother.

As for John's Gospel, the nearest analogy to the Syro-Phoenician woman's story is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Only in two Gospels do we directly confront the issue of a daughter's importance. Indeed, the only other mother-daughter stories in the entire Bible are concerned with the preservation or destruction of a famous man-- Moses and John the Baptist, respectively. If this daughter matters, all women matter. A mother's voice is heard, and a daughter is made whole. The significance of this theme is illuminated by a comparison with the somewhat parallel Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. Demeter, the goddess of all growing things on earth, grieved inconsolably when her beloved daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld. However, Persephone's father, Zeus, made no objection to Hades' action until the angry Demeter caused all the crops and fruits to fail. As a compromise, Zeus declared that Persephone would be with her mother half the year and live with Hades the other half of the year. This myth of the changing seasons is also the archetypal story of a loving mother and daughter relationship in

which the mother is unable to protect her daughter from more powerful male figures. Certainly this narrative reflects the harsh reality--not limited to ancient times--that fathers had much more control than mothers over who married their daughters. Demeter's joy is diminished by the knowledge that she will lose her daughter again and again. Her story mirrors human grief for the loss of loved ones, but the biblical mother's successful quest reflects the affirmation that women matter--even if they have no power to strike back as Demeter does when she brings famine upon earth.

Women matter because justice matters. The scarcity of positive mother-daughter stories in our literature is bound up with our culture's forgetting of this truth. When mothers are truly honored and permitted to develop their human potential, Persephone can do the same without painful separation from Demeter. The literary tradition explored in this study suggests that harmonious relationships between mothers and daughters are fostered if and when men and women are equally respected as members of society, or, in religious metaphor, equally regarded as made in the image of God.

Unfortunately the Christian churches have frequently failed to affirm the equal worth of men and women. Platonic anti-materialism and Manichaeism influenced the early Church fathers, most notably St. Augustine, to disparage the natural world and all physical experience

(especially sexuality), and hence to form a host of negative associations with women. Whereas modern Christian institutions feel compelled to defend Jesus' divinity, early Christians argued over his humanity--the improbability of God becoming literally incarnate and sharing the struggles of mortal life. Leonard Swidler concludes that the mainstream Christian church gradually reversed three principles of its founder Jesus: the ideal of service rather than authoritarianism, the affirmation of abundant life (including physical and natural components), and an egalitarian attitude toward women (355).

These three reversals have made it difficult for women to manifest the Christlike characteristics described earlier in this chapter, even though this ideal receives much lip service. Through most of history, they have rarely been encouraged to develop courage, independence, and other leadership qualities. Ironically, when many Victorians discarded the earlier association between women and carnality, it was only to portray women as pure, unworldly, and spiritually-minded, men as more sexual and materialistic. Of course, the pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige in an increasingly secular society served to discourage men from developing such Christlike qualities as love, humility, and forgiveness--and therefore to strengthen the separation of public and domestic spheres. Subsequently, many women who have never considered themselves feminist harbor a deep resentment of men, looking down on them as an unfortunate but necessary means of getting

children, or as overgrown children themselves who must be catered to and given their little comforts to keep them good-humored. In recent years, some feminists seem to have a revengeful desire to trade places with men by seizing the prevailing power structures of society.

Those who identify themselves as biblical feminists, however, maintain ideals of humility, a loving concern for women whose problems may be different from their own, and a readiness to forgive past wrongs and work with men to create a just and harmonious community. They recognize their religious heritage is divided into many strands, some of which have in fact retained the principles Swidler attributes to Jesus. Elaine Pagels explains that "during the first two centuries the Christian movement may have been even more diversified than it is today . . . and various groups of Christians perceived Jesus very differently" (151-52). There was, she concludes, no "golden age" of "purer and simpler early Christianity" (152). For the literary critic, the importance of this approach is that it rejects the concept of Christianity as monolithically antifeminist or feminist, on the grounds that its definition depends heavily upon the interpretation of literary texts.

Many elements of contemporary feminist theology and creation spirituality are anticipated in the ancient Celtic Christianity of the British Isles, which developed in relative isolation from Rome.<sup>6</sup> Among the pagan Celts, women traditionally served as healers, midwives, and religious leaders.

During the Christian era, abbesses such as St. Brigid of Kildare and Hilda of Whitby governed large religious communities that included both male and female monastics. Much literature of ancient Britain and Ireland harmonizes the contemplative life with love for humanity and for all the "blessed creation." Celtic Christianity was considerably influenced by the individualistic Desert Fathers and by the theologian Pelagius (considered a heretic by Rome), who emphasized moral choice and God's loving forgiveness rather than the doctrine of original sin and the imminence of divine wrath (Van de Weyer 2-6).

However, at the Synod of Whitby in 664, Celtic Christians suffered a great defeat, partly because of their interest in learning from their Roman colleagues. The abbess Hilda, whose community studied both Celtic and Roman writings, hoped for a compromise between the two cultures. In contrast, the southern leaders despised the Celts and warned of their damnation if they resisted allegiance to the Pope (Van de Weyer 21). From then on the great Celtic manuscripts rested forgotten in libraries, while songs and sayings continued to be passed down by the common people, to be recorded more than a thousand years later. An extraordinary compendium of these orally transmitted materials, known as the Carmina Gaedelica (literally, Charms of the Gaels), was collected and edited near the end of the

nineteenth century by the Scotsman Alexander Carmichael, who left some of the six-volume project to be completed by his heirs.

Ironically, the Protestant reformers' objections to the mainstream Catholic Church have contributed to perennial Protestant ignorance of the diversity in early Christendom--and thus to the need for reinventing its feminist (and ecological) elements, in accordance with historian Gerda Lerner's argument cited in the introduction to this chapter. Regrettably, Emily Dickinson probably knew very little of this tradition, which she would have found extremely congenial. The treasures of Celtic Christianity are only recently becoming accessible through excellent introductions such as Esther de Waal's Every Earthly Blessing and Robert Van de Weyer's anthology Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland.

Meanwhile, numerous folktales affirming female courage, intelligent initiative, and unselfish love have also been preserved throughout Europe, most commonly in the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia. One of the most popular tales of the late Middle Ages concerned "Pope Joan." Supposedly a woman in disguise contrived to function quite successfully as Pope, not being found out until her death resulting from a fall in St. Peter's square due to the onset of childbirth pangs! J. Edgar Bruns has pointed out that the legend's immense popularity indicates that many people thought it possible for a woman to successfully fill the highest office in Christendom

(75). As Virginia Woolf once observed, Anonymous was often a woman (Room 51). In folklore and formal literature one can encounter the dreams and visions that may have been elsewhere suppressed by powerful authorities of the world.

### The Sister Who Seeks and Saves

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues, and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matt. 6:5-6

You have been in the wood, and I have been at home, and yet I know more than you.

"The Twelve Brothers"

The Soul that hath a Guest  
Doth seldom go abroad--  
Diviner Crowd at Home--  
Obliterate the need--

Dickinson, #674

The archetypal story of the sister who seeks and saves her brothers is known to folklorists as Tale Type 451, "The Maiden Who Saves her Brothers." Although the Grimm version is called "The Twelve Brothers," the sister is clearly the central character. Some variants of the tale (such as Hans Christian Andersen's) downplay the sister's courage and independence, but

the heroine of "The Twelve Brothers" is an impressively Christlike figure. She is loving, brave, unconventional, forgiving, and ultimately successful in the mission she undertakes, providing a female prototype for the literary heroines who may otherwise be described as Christlike.<sup>7</sup>

The story tells of a king and queen who have twelve sons. The king plots to kill his sons if the next child is a daughter, so that all the riches and power of the kingdom may be hers alone. But the queen is so sorrow-stricken that her youngest son, Benjamin, notices her grief and learns of the king's plan. When their sister is born, the brothers escape and settle in a cottage deep in the forest. In great anger, they swear revenge on any girl they might meet. The princess grows in wisdom and beauty and eventually discovers the secret of the twelve brothers she has never seen. She is so disturbed by her father's injustice that she gives up her inheritance to go and seek her brothers. After a long search she finds young Benjamin alone in the cottage and reveals herself to him. He hides her until he is able to persuade his brothers to spare her life. Charmed by her grace and beauty, they welcome her to share their forest home.

One day the princess picks twelve flowers from the garden, not knowing they were enchanted. The house vanishes, and the brothers turn into twelve ravens and fly away. A wise old woman tells the sister that the enchantment can be broken only if she will remain silent for seven years



(and, in some versions, sew a shirt or coat for each brother). The sister determines to do this. Before long, a young king rides through the wood, falls in love with the beautiful maiden, and begs her to become his bride. She agrees with a silent nod. They are happily married for some years, until the king's mother begins to slander the young queen, inventing evil explanations for her strange silence. Finally the king reluctantly orders his wife's death, but just before the sentence is carried out, the seven years are over and the twelve ravens fly down to regain their human forms. At last the young queen can explain her silence to her husband, who rejoices at her innocence. All live happily ever after, except the mother-in-law who is executed for her murderous schemes.

The first obvious parallel with Christ is that the sister refuses worldly riches and power, as Jesus resists similar temptations in the wilderness. To create this important element of the plot, the storytellers imagined a truly fantastic situation: the king intends to make his daughter his only heir. Through centuries of Western civilization, men traditionally desire sons to inherit their name and property, and the sons in most cases welcome their favored position. But in this folktale, no one ever returns to the old kingdom. Its value is thus severely questioned.

Mysteriously, the sister saves her brothers from their own hate and revenge, as well as from enchantment. Many readers might well understand

the resentment felt by the unjustly treated brothers, if not with their furious vow to kill any girl they meet--a mirror image of the general bitterness against men so commonly (but often unfairly) ascribed to feminists today. Fortunately the brothers' hearts are softened so that they spare their sister's life. But this is not enough for the storytellers who spun the tale. The brothers must come to a fuller realization of their sister's character, for her love is worth more than the kingdom they have lost. Thus, a new challenge arises when they are transformed into birds, and the sister promptly finds out--from a wise woman--what she must do.

At this point the sister's marriage takes place and further complicates her life. This is an unusually realistic situation, in contrast to popular novels and Disney tales in which the wedding ends the story and everyone lives happily ever after. Now that the sister has found a happy home in a new kingdom, she could easily give up her peculiar behavior, enjoy her husband, and placate her mother-in-law. Yet she freely chooses to risk her life for the sake of others, much as Jesus speaks of laying down his life voluntarily (John 10:15-18). Therefore, the sister is not a helpless victim of oppression like the many real and fictional women represented by her mother. The unhappy queen did not dare oppose her husband openly, and it never seems to have occurred to her to flee the country along with her children. She knew her place. Through the sister's actions, however, the storytellers suggest that

marriage should not prevent a woman from following her own conscience. Similarly, Jesus warns his disciples that even family ties must not be set above one's commitment to do what is right.

Following her mission in silence brings the sister into the lonely shadow of death. Her silence not only attracts suspicion and furthers the plot; it also beautifully symbolizes any unconventional woman's problem of communication. Even today it can still be very hard for a woman to explain why she feels called to pursue her own quest, her own mission in life, particularly if she also desires marriage and motherhood. In earlier centuries a single woman could devote her life to the service of humanity as a nun, sometimes contributing to important reforms in both religious and secular spheres, whereas wives and mothers have usually had less time, education, and opportunity to influence their society on a large scale. Nevertheless, some of them had the imagination and intelligence to pass on their vision of women's potential through feminist folk tales. As Marina Warner concludes in From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers, "Women's capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the permitted boundaries of their lives" (393). She notes the paradox that "women narrators, extolling the magic silence of the heroic sister . . . are speaking themselves, breaking the silence, telling a story" (394). The

socially imposed silence so often equated with female virtue is here transformed to a voluntary silence to achieve one's chosen mission.

If the original queen-mother represents passive timid women, the mother-in-law represents those women who find ways to influence men who have more power than they, contriving to bring about their own goals indirectly. They may be threatened by women who take action themselves to remedy a bad situation--even women like the sister whose action of keeping silence (and making coats for the brothers) is nothing so dramatically assertive as killing dragons or leading an army. The mother-in-law in some versions actually steals the young queen's infant children and falsely accuses her of killing them, as a means of convincing the king to order his innocent wife's death. Again, this situation parallels the criticism often suffered by women who feel called to any vocation beyond the service of their immediate families. Children's shortcomings and misfortunes are frequently blamed upon their mothers' attention to other activities, no matter how complex the actual causes.

Through all her trials the sister endures until her mission is accomplished. She has made possible a new community. The happy ending does not happen to her; it happens because of her. She is an early example of female merit defined in non-sexual terms, but not excluding sexuality. Until the nineteenth century, the "virtue" of most literary heroines consisted

mainly of virginity or fidelity. Male heroes, on the other hand, could be highly honored for other qualities, such as courage or honesty, even if they engaged in sexual conduct for which women would have been condemned. The sister's happy marriage is a comfort and reward for her struggles, but it is not her only object in life. She is sister as well as spouse. The young king progresses from loving his silent wife for her grace and beauty, to nearly destroying her, to understanding her strong and courageous character.

Another male character is especially significant from a feminist perspective. Young Benjamin is somewhat different from his brothers. Our attention is drawn to him because he is the only named character in the tale. He discovers the king's cruel plot because he is closest to his mother. He accepts the role of housekeeper in the cottage, and he persuades his brothers to drop their grudge against their sister. Before he reveals her presence, he arouses their curiosity with the gently mocking words, "You have been in the wood, and I have been at home, and yet I know more than you." One can hardly imagine a more vivid expression of feminist consciousness--or a statement more harmonious with Emily Dickinson's life and art.

For those aware of feminism's religious roots, the vision of a new world requires the cooperation of men with Benjamin's ability to reject traditional masculine stereotypes, even as women reject traditional feminine stereotypes. Anyone familiar with the book of Genesis will readily note that

Benjamin shares the name of the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob, ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The biblical Benjamin never seems jealous of his favored brother Joseph, and he is the only brother apparently too young to have contributed to his sister Dinah's sorrows. Although Jacob's sons are among the best known characters in Scripture, few people have ever heard of Dinah's tragic story, found in Genesis 34. By coincidence or design, the tale of the sister who saves her brothers presents a striking contrast to this painfully sexist account of distorted human relationships.

Dinah loses her virginity to an over-passionate but well-intentioned prince named Shechem. He comforts her and brings his father and friends to ask Jacob for her hand in marriage. Like Jacob's youthful love for Rachel, Shechem's earnest desire for this particular bride at any cost is unusual in the Old Testament. Perhaps it is in character that Jacob is willing to consider the alliance. Dinah's brothers, however, are infuriated by the violation of family honor. They pretend consent to the marriage on condition that Shechem and all his townsmen be circumcised like themselves. While the men are recuperating, the brothers go out and kill them all--taking their women along with other booty. Jacob reproves their violence, but from beginning to end neither he nor they express the least interest in Dinah's opinion, nor in God's opinion either. Dinah is treated as a devalued family possession, not as a human individual whose feelings matter. Nothing

matters but her sexual status. Does she mourn the loss of her bridegroom, or blame herself as the source of all the trouble? Nothing more is recorded of this forgotten daughter of Israel.

Genesis tells us what can happen to a sister of twelve brothers in the familiar setting of patriarchal culture. The folk storytellers dream of a world turned upside down, where a favored daughter receives wealth, power, and privilege, but cares more about love and justice. The Dinahs of the world have little opportunity to attain the heroic character of the folktale sister--who has some affinities with Joseph, the favored brother traditionally considered a type of Christ. Dinah has no realistic means of transforming her brothers' revenge into forgiveness for herself and the young man who is so eager to make amends. Why, then, would not a tale in which a woman saves her literal or figurative sisters from male oppression provide a more suitable feminist model than does "The Twelve Brothers"?

In response, it must be emphasized that solidarity against oppression is a very widespread human tendency, not an exclusively Christlike or female phenomenon. As Jesus observes in the Sermon on the Mount, those who salute their friends and love those who love them deserve little reward (see Matthew 5 and Luke 6). Anyone can do that. The sister of the twelve brothers represents a far more difficult heroism, Christlike in her concern for the brothers she has never seen, her willingness to give up her own

advantages for the sake of justice, and her courage in risking her life when she has nothing to gain by it. She is therefore the prototypical female model for men who in the real world possess the more privileged status she enjoys at the beginning of the tale, but must renounce that status if a new community of equals is to be achieved.

More realistic literary modes have seldom been able to re-create the full autonomy of the sister's situation until relatively recent years. Therefore, another tale cluster, Tale Type 425, should be noted as an early variation of female heroism contributing to the same literary tradition. This tale type is best known through some variant of "Beauty and the Beast." An early literary version is "Cupid and Psyche," incorporated by Apuleis in The Golden Ass during the second century A.D., and therefore relatively available as a source for later writers. It is difficult to be certain whether Emily Dickinson was familiar with Grimm's Household Tales (of which various collections were published in America in 1853, 1862, and 1869), but a large painting of Cupid and Psyche hung in the parlor of her brother and sister-in-law's home (St. Armand 150), which strongly suggests that the poet would have known this story.

After Psyche/Beauty's curiosity about her shape-changing husband leads to their separation, she wins him back through a long painful quest, including several seemingly impossible tasks which are accomplished by



accepting advice from the humblest of creatures encountered on the journey. Although this quest again reveals the traits of courage, love, persistence, humility, and unconventionality, and usually demands a visit to the underworld or a supernatural glass mountain, the protagonist's efforts chiefly benefit herself and her beloved, whereas the sister's mission is undertaken for her brothers. Certainly motifs of both tale clusters are visible in the literary tradition of heroines resembling these characters.

### Conclusion

The virtues of literary heroines may benefit their husbands, other women, other men, or the community at large, but on the whole the sphere of influence gradually increases with time--with positive maternal influence on daughters a disturbingly rare and late development, as we shall see. This slow expansion of women's sphere of positive influence in literature seems to reflect and shape the gradual (although uneven) improvement of women's position in external society. If this is so, the examination of admirable female characters not only illuminates the relevant literary works, but also contributes to interdisciplinary cultural studies, of which women's studies are an essential part.

Significantly, the hidden feminist consciousness traced by Gerda Lerner immediately surfaces in the earliest French and English full-length books

known to be written by women. Christine de Pisan (1365-1431) was unusually well educated by her father and encouraged in her studies by her husband. Widowed after ten years, she proceeded to support herself, her mother, and three small children by her writing, something difficult enough to do even in the twentieth century. Widely read during her lifetime, Christine de Pisan is best remembered for The Book of the City of Ladies, a history of good women throughout Western civilization, including diverse examples from mythology, Scripture, classical history, and Christian legends to support her defense of the capacities and rights of the female sex. In England, de Pisan's contemporary Lady Julian of Norwich dictated the Revelations of Divine Love (an eloquent account of fourteen religious visions to which she attributed her recovery from a mortal illness), in which she matter-of-factly included feminine imagery for God. Predictably, many modern advocates and detractors of such imagery are equally unaware of its literary precedents.

By the nineteenth century, however, it was becoming easier for women to learn of the ideas and actions of women before them. Organized activity in behalf of women's equality is sometimes dated from the 1792 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women. More important than any single insight this volume contained is the fact that it endured as a known reference source for subsequent activists for women's

rights. Similarly, more women were reading and writing creative literature than ever before--and many, like Emily Dickinson, were particularly interested in reading one another and in sharing their books with friends.

Such an environment fostered Dickinson's outstanding artistic achievements, even though there remained much in her culture--and her particular subculture--to constrain her. As Jack Capps puts it in his invaluable study Emily Dickinson's Reading, the poet seems to have gone through life

shopping in the literary marketplace. She looked at everything, took what she wanted, but did not presume to criticize. . . . She collected a variety of materials; when she encountered promising words and phrases, she took them along against the day when they would satisfy one poem's demands; and, occasionally, she found a literary bargain that she could eventually rework to advantage. (25)

Among the literary resources available to Dickinson, she would have found the recurring figure of the Christlike woman, the archetypal "sister in search" whose virtues are not stereotypically feminine, but human--worthy of admiration by men and women alike. It is the purpose of the following chapters, as previously indicated, to trace the development of this neglected tradition in several texts of English and American literature, and explore its

affinities with Emily Dickinson, who perhaps more than any other woman of letters deserves the title of "Shakespeare's sister."

Chapter Two of this study will examine several examples of this female archetype in English literature and their parallels with the personae of Emily Dickinson. Included are Shakespeare's disappearing and returning heroines, especially in The Winter's Tale; Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*; George Eliot's Dinah Morris, Maggie Tulliver, and Dorothea Brooke; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*; and George MacDonald's Princess Irene and her grandmother in the 1872 fantasy The Princess and the Goblin. Several critics have discussed the influence upon Dickinson of these British writers (with the exception of MacDonald), but not explicitly in the context of a subversive Christian feminist tradition thriving in literary form.

Chapter Three will examine further illustrations of such a tradition in the writings of some of Dickinson's American contemporaries, including Lucy Larcom's autobiography and poems, Harriet Beecher Stowe's The Minister's Wooing, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Silent Partner, and Mary Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Again, attention is directed to the Christlike qualities of the heroines and to Dickinson poems which in some way parallel the characters, situations, and themes of these works--especially Stowe's passionate critique of Puritanism and her realistic depiction of love's joys and sorrows.

Having demonstrated the possibility that Dickinson created "supposed persons" similar to the heroines of her literary predecessors and contemporaries, the fourth chapter will focus directly on those poems wherein the persona seems most closely to approximate Dickinson herself. These poems--of dedication to one's vocation, of commitment to a central mystical relationship, and of reaching out to future readers through artistic dramatization of a spiritual quest--particularly reflect Dickinson's knowledge of the Bible, as well as something of her inward struggles to reconcile her Calvinist heritage with ideas encountered through her wide reading and circle of acquaintances and with her own extraordinary creative gifts. Metaphorically and perhaps literally, she designed for herself the roles of Shakespeare's sister and "Queen of Calvary" (Poem #348)--the "Lily" who rises from "the Dark Sod" to "Ecstasy--and Dell" (Poem #392). Although poems of joy and despair, faith and doubt, recur throughout the Dickinson canon, her more optimistic work dissolves the traditional hierarchies of sacred and secular, male and female, as if rediscovering or reinventing an older and more holistic spiritual perspective.

Finally, a brief overview of the continuing tradition of Christlike women in literature following Dickinson will be presented, emphasizing that the significance of the entire study goes well beyond illuminating the possible influences of Dickinson's reading upon her work. Although much twentieth-

century literature reflects disillusionment with world wars, materialism, and mismanaged relationships, some recent women writers and male writers from formerly disadvantaged classes continue to explore the human longing for integrity of mind, heart, body, and soul, and the possibility for female guidance in that quest, symbolized in this study by the figure of the sister who seeks and saves. Contemporary heroines in this tradition often share Dickinson's revisionist approach of working within a heritage from which she cannot separate herself, but which she feels compelled to reshape. The poet herself may now be seen as a silent sister whose "slant" revolution accomplished more than was formerly realized (see Juhasz 175). As we shall see, Dickinson's remarkable integration of life and art, of reading and writing, provides a perennial challenge to all who are involved with the theory and practice of feminist and cultural studies.

## Notes

1. Curiously, a somewhat similar controversy exists over the extent to which Emily Dickinson's hundreds of lyrics should be considered separately or read in light of others employing the same images or preserved in the same fascicle.
2. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, supported her husband's loyalty to the Royalist cause during the English Civil War, even though they had to leave the country for a time, and he seems to have supported her outspoken defense of women's educational and political rights. Margaret Fell married George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends, after her first husband died. The Friends, commonly known as Quakers, regarded the inner light of the Spirit as supreme authority and openly supported the equality of the sexes on religious grounds. The prolific feminist poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, and her husband were well-to-do, but fell out of favor when the Protestant rulers William and Mary replaced James Stuart on the throne. The Quakers Lucretia and James Mott actively supported women's rights, taking considerable responsibility for the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, from which the organized women's movement in America is usually dated. Lucy Stone the suffragist and Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained to the ministry in the United States, married Henry and Samuel Blackwell, whose sisters Elizabeth and Emily became the first women doctors. Virginia Woolf's husband Leonard was a Jewish social activist. All these men were political, social, or religious nonconformists who supported and in some cases participated in feminist activities.
3. In her study of how women in the Gospels have been portrayed in church history and art, Moltmann-Wendel has found that Martha was admired as a missionary saint during the Middle Ages and depicted by Renaissance artists as a strong heroine overcoming a terrible dragon. Unlike St. George, she does so unarmed and peacefully (39-48). It is ironic that such popular responses to biblical stories have often been more affirming of women than official interpretations.
4. Other examples include #159 ("A little bread--a crust--a crumb;"), #335 ("Tis not that Dying hurts us so--"), #579 ("I had been hungry all the Years--"), and #773 ("Deprived of other Banquet").

5. See #328 ("A Bird came down the Walk"), #651 ("So much Summer"), #760 ("Most she touched me by her muteness--"), # \*64 ("The Robin for the Crumb"), and #880 ("The Bird must sing to earn the Crumb").
6. Creation spirituality is an ecologically conscious movement whose most noted advocate is the contemporary liberal theologian Matthew Fox; it is not to be confused with creationism, a fundamentalist view that regards divine creation and evolution as two opposing theories of the origin of life.
7. Much of the material in this section appeared in a somewhat different form in my article entitled "A Feminist Folktale," published in The Other Side, August 1984: 17-19.



## CHAPTER TWO

## THE TRADITION IN ENGLAND AND ITS INFLUENCE ON DICKINSON

. . . Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

Luke 2:10

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination  
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.12-20

What News must think when pondering  
If News have any Thought  
Concerning the stupendousness  
Of its perceiveless freight!

Dickinson, #1319

Although the concept of intertextuality has gained prominence through the theories of Julia Kristeva, among others, it was previously expounded in a different fashion by the dean of archetypal criticism, Northrop Frye. In A Natural Perspective, Frye analyzed Shakespeare's characterizations of women in structural terms echoing the central Christian romance. Much romance literature prior to Shakespeare followed the courtly love convention,

in which a male lover revolved cyclically around a temperamental female figure, generally with limited sexual contact between lover and mistress. In contrast, Frye explains, Shakespeare's works repeatedly develop a pattern in which a disappearing and returning heroine revolves cyclically around a male lover, and is usually the efficient cause of the conclusion. We may call this, the movement opposite to that of the white goddess, the cycle of the black bride . . . who seeks her lover through darkness, disguise, humiliation, or even death until she finds him. (84-85)

Frye takes the term "black bride" from the remarkably egalitarian Song of Songs. Although these heroines suffer rejection and death or apparent death, their love and forgiveness lead to the possibility of reunion and reconciliation, much as the story of Christ's resurrection conveys the theme of love's power to transcend evil and death. Hero, Helena, Desdemona, Imogen, and Hermione are all unjustly rejected by the men they love, and are reported dead, but all except Desdemona in fact survive to be reconciled with the remorseful males. Juliet also experiences a temporary "death" before her literal death, although for a different reason. The present study traces a similar pattern of female heroism in subsequent literature, in many cases created by women. Several nineteenth-century writers have given "a local habitation and a name" (see A Midsummer Night's Dream, 5.1.17) to the

figure of the black bride, who might equally well be called the sister-savior, in allusion to the protagonist of "The Twelve Brothers." These affirmations of female nonconformity would surely have contributed to Emily Dickinson's well-known admiration for the major British women writers of her era.

The affinities between Dickinson and the other writers to be discussed in this chapter may be clarified by analogy with a central issue in folklore studies. The many variants of folktales and the widespread recurrence of their specific motifs may be attributed to diffusion (the direct oral transmission of the material from one location to another) or to polygenesis (the separate origin of similar plots and motifs in different locations, due to basic psychological or sociological realities of human existence). Much of the controversy over these possibilities may be unnecessary, for, as Alan Dundes argues, even if there is historical evidence proving diffusion in any given case, the reasons why that story as opposed to another was readily adapted by different groups may nonetheless have to do with fundamental psychological or sociological similarities across cultures (53). The similarity between stories found in different locations may be significant regardless of whether direct historical links can be established. It should also be noted that, contrary to popular notions about folklore transmission, there are a relatively small number of active tradition-bearers to be found in a culture, as opposed to passive receivers of the traditions (von Sydow 231). This

finding tends to support the theory of polygenesis, but the fact remains that active tradition-bearers will usually be eager to hear new and interesting variants of a familiar tale that do come their way.

In the same way, portrayals of the black bride or sister-savior figure in formal literature may often be influenced by the authors' common knowledge of biblical material or Shakespearean heroines, whether or not a particular writer is also familiar with another individual writer. On the other hand, the polygenesis of Christlike women in literature could arise for the obvious reason that women in many times and places have resisted social restrictions against the full expression of their intelligence and talents, and thus have been moved to create courageous female role models who triumph over obstacles and bring about positive changes for themselves and for others. Although folklore and literature can serve to promote cultural norms, they can also serve to communicate nonconformist views concerning women's roles or any other controversial issue. Thus, the parallels between Emily Dickinson's poetry and other literary texts are significant, even though it might be difficult to find evidence of direct influence for any given poem, because they indicate that many of Dickinson's responses to her religious and social milieu were neither rare nor pathological.

For example, the protagonist of Jane Eyre rejects both religious and secular authoritarianism and gradually develops an independent moral

vision upon which to base her personal decisions concerning self-denial or self-fulfillment. In some of George Eliot's novels, the heroines are even more openly nonconformist than Jane, yet Dinah Morris of Adam Bede and Dorothea Brooke of Middlemarch succeed in influencing many characters besides their future husbands. Also, the intrepid heroine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh manages to overcome the obstacles hindering her unconventional ambition to be a self-supporting female artist. Not surprisingly, Aurora Leigh had a profound impact on other women writers, such as Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, which illustrates the growing visibility of a feminist literary tradition. Finally, George MacDonald's subversive fantasy, The Princess and the Goblin, represents the integration of Christian and feminist values by a male writer. In this richly symbolic tale, the little Princess Irene learns to be guided by her mysterious great-grandmother, who unobtrusively and indirectly wields the equivalent of divine powers within her fictional universe. All these characters, as will be shown, share affinities with the sister who seeks and saves her brothers--and with Emily Dickinson's personae.

### Images of Grace: Shakespeare's Imperishable Women

It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things to the

apostles. And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.

Luke 24: 10-11

That she is living,  
Were it but told you, should be hooted at  
Like an old tale; but it appears she lives,  
Though yet she speaks not.

William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale (5.3.98-103; 115-118)

. . . I'll tell Thee All--how Bald it grew--  
How Midnight felt, at first--to me--  
How all the Clocks stopped in the World--  
And Sunshine pinched me--'Twas so cold--

Then how the Grief got sleepy--some--  
As if my soul were deaf and dumb--  
Just making signs--across--to Thee--  
That this way--thou could'st notice me--

I'll tell you how I tried to keep  
A smile, to show you, when this Deep  
All Waded--We look back for Play,  
At those Old Times--in Calvary. . .

Dickinson, #547

Shakespeare's portrayals of women have attracted increasing attention since the advent of feminist scholarship. Throughout his works he created several outstanding heroines who are touchstones for other characters. Evil is often defined by the rejection or destruction of these heroines; goodness is synonymous with recognizing their true merits. Shakespeare is also notable for the realistic depiction of several close female friendships. Moreover, as Caroline Spurgeon meticulously demonstrated in her classic study of the

playwright's imagery, he makes surprisingly frequent use of domestic images referring to food, clothing, fire, and common household activities that are perennially part of women's lives (418).

These factors, in addition to Shakespeare's matchless command of the language, would go far to explain Emily Dickinson's passionate admiration for him. Despite their obvious differences in formal techniques, both writers employ a high proportion of images concerning gardening, flowers, birds, weather, the sun, and the sea. Both are also given to personifying elements of nature, as well as various human states and emotions (see Spurgeon 419). Furthermore, Emily Dickinson's recurrent image of the woman who dies but lives to tell of the experience, explored in the following pages, may have been influenced by those Shakespearean heroines identified by Northrop Frye as the "black brides" whose love transcends their apparent or actual deaths.

Richard Sewall, while conceding the formal dissimilarity of the two writers, believes that Shakespeare's "tone and spirit" affected the poet profoundly. "In Shakespeare's robust, un-Puritan expression was a whole new world for her of feeling and fulfillment" (704). Likewise, Jack Capps aptly describes Shakespeare's influence on Dickinson as "an absorption that took place over a long period, leaving marks that can be best discerned by careful scrutiny in bright light" (66). It is very plausible that Dickinson's fascination with the experience and aftermath of death sometimes reflects her imaginative response to the dying and returning Shakespearean heroines--whose devoted loyalty to their lover/husbands definitely resembles that of Dickinson's personae to the beloved Master-figure. These thematic

parallels, however, need not mean that she had any one specific Shakespearean heroine in mind in any given poem.

Nevertheless, Dickinson must have been particularly delighted by The Winter's Tale. Spurgeon's study of the imagery reveals that this late romance is strongly dominated by the theme of the common flow of life in all things, the similarity of rhythm in human experience with the vast rhythm of all nature (305-6). The Bohemian scenes especially share what Barton St. Armand terms the "sacramental intensity" characterizing Dickinson's celebration of nature (St. Armand 205). In this play, more than any other, Spurgeon finds that flowers are associated with human qualities and emotions (306), as they often are in Dickinson's poetry. The Winter's Tale tells of the impossible made probable, of miracle and mystery breaking in upon an all-too-familiar world. Dickinson similarly celebrates the transcendent within the immanent; in #448 she defines a poet as one who "Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings--."

In The Winter's Tale, Queen Hermione, her daughter Perdita, and her friend Paulina all may be described as Christlike in different ways, as Dickinson may well have recognized. Hermione is Shakespeare's culminating example of the "black bride" figure. Her death or disappearance lasts until her husband comes to his true self, does penance, and is prepared to see her as she is. The entire incident of the statue, Hermione's restoration and reunion with her husband and daughter, and the characters of Paulina, Antigonus, Autolycus, and the Shepherd's Son are all Shakespearean additions to the basic story of his source, Greene's prose romance Pandosto (Muir 241-45). That Hermione remains in seclusion, making Leontes suffer



for sixteen years, is barely possible but improbable in light of her loving nature. That she dies and is restored by divine grace when her daughter returns is physically impossible, but plausible in the context of the play's themes of rebirth and reconciliation.

Supporting the latter alternative, David Bergeron has found that in early seventeenth-century England it was becoming the fashion to have very lifelike statues of the deceased on their tombstones, so Hermione's statue in Paulina's chapel would have seemed natural to the original audiences (131). James Siemon further notes that Paulina's rage, Antigonus' dream, Leontes' sorrow after presumably carrying out his plan for "one grave . . . for both" wife and son (3.2.236), and his amazement at Hermione's restoration all point to the Queen's death (14), with only two textual suggestions to the contrary (5.2.105-08 and 5.3.126-29). Furthermore, reports of performances through the years indicate that in the theater most audiences assume Hermione is indeed dead and are surprised when she descends from the pedestal (Bergeron 125). As Paulina says, "It is required / You do awake your faith" to appreciate this dramatic scene (5.3.94-95).

Of all the Dickinson poems thematically similar to The Winter's Tale, #383 is unusually suggestive:

Long Years apart--can make no  
 Breach a second cannot fill--  
 The absence of the Witch does not  
 Invalidate the spell--

The embers of a Thousand Years  
 Uncovered by the Hand  
 That fondled them when they were Fire  
 Will stir and understand--

"You hear my spell is lawful," Paulina declares as Hermione returns to life (5.3.105). "If this be magic, let it be an art/Lawful as eating," Leontes exclaims as he embraces his wife after sixteen years apart (5.3.109-10).

That separation resulted from Leontes's unfounded suspicion that Hermione has been unfaithful to him with his friend Polixenes. The Queen's integrity of character is so great that Camillo, the other courtiers, and above all Paulina are willing to argue with the angry Leontes in her defense. The word "grace" and its derivatives are frequently used of and by Hermione (1.2.80,99,105; 2.1.122; 5.3.27); Perdita is also described as "now grown in grace" (4.1.24). The Queen faces her imprisonment and trial with dignity and courage. Instead of pitying herself, she comforts her ladies and even thinks of the King's shame when he realizes his error: "How will this grieve you / When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that / You thus have published me!" (2.1.96-98). She is already prepared to forgive him because he knows not what he does. Similarly, Dickinson's persona in #538 "'Tis true--They shut me in the Cold" requests the Deity's forgiveness for those who have harmed her.

Another important component of Hermione's character is revealed in a relatively overlooked passage near the beginning of the play. When she laughingly asks Polixenes for stories of the two kings' boyhood, he describes their youth idyllically:

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i' the sun  
 And bleat the one at the other. What we changed  
 Was innocence for innocence, we knew not  
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed  
 That any did. (1.2.67-71)

When the Queen inquires about their implied loss of innocence since, Polixenes explains that they had not yet met their wives! Hermione understandably objects to this attitude: "Of this make no conclusion, lest you say / Your Queen and I are devils" (81-82). She ironically assures him that the two queens will take full responsibility for any "sins" committed with them, provided their husbands have been faithful. To her, committed sexual intimacy is not sinful at all, contrary to the views of Augustine and other Church fathers whose works were known to at least the more educated among Shakespeare's audience.

At this very moment Leontes calls out to ask if she has yet persuaded Polixenes to stay longer, and then works himself into a destructive jealousy. His fall into sin is dramatized as the precise opposite of what Polixenes has said--not his joyous union with Hermione, but his irrational turning against her. It has often been observed that Leontes is his own Iago, much more to blame for his behavior than is Othello. Whereas Othello believes Iago's plausible evidence that his wife is an adulteress, Leontes even contradicts the gods' clear message, declaring, "There is no truth at all i' the oracle" (3.2.140). He sees the truth only because of his son's death, one of many destructive consequences of the King's ill-judged rage.

The mystery surrounding Hermione's apparent death is echoed in Dickinson's poems about dying, yet not dying:

To die--without the Dying  
 And live--without the Life  
 This is the hardest Miracle  
 Propounded to Belief. (#1017)

Other variations of the strangely alive dead woman appear in #510 ("It was not Death, for I stood up, / And all the Dead, lie down") and in #1743 ("The grave my little cottage is"). In the latter, the speaker apparently exists in a kind of halfway house, not yet in "everlasting life." One of Dickinson's most vivid delineations of the dying process occurs in #577, where the speaker recalls "How Midnight felt, at first--to me-- / How all the Clocks stopped in the World / And Sunshine pinched me-- 'Twas so cold--." She anticipates a joyous reunion with her beloved, which will be all the brighter in contrast with the memory of "those Old times in Calvary."

A similar reversal of mood occurs in The Winter's Tale, wherein the wintry storms of the first three acts subside as an old shepherd discovers a wondrously fair child. Perdita, the lost one, grows up like the princess she truly is, full of beauty, poise, grace, wit, and courage, like her mother before her. "Nothing she does or seems/But smacks of something greater than herself" (4.4.157-58). Peter Lindenbaum observes that Perdita particularly resembles her mother in her wholesome attitude toward sexual love; she is "thoroughly chaste and modest" yet "particularly frank and open about her sexual drives" (14). Samuel Bethell calls attention to a Sicilian courtier's hyperbolic description of Perdita (100):

This is a creature  
 Would she begin a sect, might quench the zeal  
 Of all professors else, make proselytes  
 Of who she but bid follow....  
 Women will love her that she is a woman  
 More worth than any man; men, that she is  
 The rarest of all women. (5.1.106-09; 110-12)

Even allowing for courtly exaggeration, it is unusual in secular literature to find such religious imagery applied to a woman who is not the speaker's beloved.

Shakespeare's heroines love and marry, but their virtues are not defined solely in terms of their relationships. If anything, the merits of his male characters are frequently defined by the nature of their relationships to the central female characters. Thus Florizel is among the most admirable of Shakespeare's lovers because he treasures Perdita for what she truly is, despite her seemingly humble origins. Florizel does not need to lose his beloved in order to appreciate her; instead of her deliberately assuming a disguise like several of Shakespeare's other heroines, the Prince disguises himself to avoid obstacles in courting her. As Carol Neely observes, Florizel "praises not her looks but her deeds" (189). Bethell describes the love of Florizel and Perdita as a balanced combination of "strong sensuality and perfect chastity" (96). The mood of their love scenes seems rekindled in certain Dickinson poems, notably #638:

To my small Hearth His fire came--  
 And all my House aglow

Did fan and rock, with sudden light--

'Twas Sunrise--'twas the Sky--

Dickinson also echoes Perdita's sorrowful response to the King's eruption of fury. Perdita grieves, "This dream of mine-- / Being now awake, I'll queen it no inch further, / But milk my ewes and weep" (4.4.450-53). In the same spirit, Dickinson's persona laments,

Dreams are the subtle Dower

That make us rich an Hour--

Then fling us poor

Out of the purple Door

Into the Precinct raw

Possessed before-- (#1376)

From the perspective of King Leontes, Perdita's return from presumed death is as unexpected as her mother's restoration. He has had ample opportunity to repent of his efforts to destroy an innocent infant (reminiscent of King Herod's designs against the infant Jesus). Paulina declares that the likelihood of finding the lost child "Is all as monstrous to our human reason / As my Antigonus to break his grave / And come again to me" (5.1.41-43). Perdita's reappearance is almost as miraculous as resurrection.

Paulina (whose name echoes that of St. Paul, preacher of Christ's resurrection) is herself Christlike in a most active sense, risking her life as she defies the enraged King. Irene Dash points out that Paulina is not the Queen's waiting woman, but her friend (275). She has been called a priestess figure, "the most selfless of all Shakespeare's women, ruthless in a cause that offers no personal profit whatsoever (Berggren 30). Similarly, Carol Neely

refers to Hermione as the play's "presiding human deity" and Paulina as her "priestess" (185).

Carolyn Asp has extensively searched English Renaissance literature for possible sources for the character of Paulina, but found none. Paulina does not fit the traditional ideal of wifely domesticity, obedience, and silence, nor can she be dismissed as a stereotypical shrew, since she acts not from self-will but from an altruistic concern for justice (145-46). Asp suggests that Paulina in her thematic role as spiritual counselor to Leontes may be modeled after the female consolatio figures found in medieval literature. The most famous examples are Lady Philosophy in Boethius' Consolations of Philosophy and Beatrice in Dante's Divine Comedy; there is reason to believe Shakespeare was familiar with both (147). The consolatio figure takes the initiative in the relationship with her subject, rebukes and shames him, then uses reason and arguments, and finally encourages him to follow the path of his new-found wisdom. Paulina parallels all of these activities (150). She calls herself a "physician" to the King's soul (2.3.54), but, as already indicated, she more literally resembles a priest. Asp comments that when we no longer see Paulina in her wifely role, she even more closely resembles the consolatio figures (153). Yet Paulina's married state is an important feminist element in the play. Paulina is Antigonus' wife and the mother of three young daughters, but these ties in no way prevent her from energetically fighting injustice in the world beyond her family circle.

Significantly, Leontes and even the lords complain of Paulina's unconventional assertiveness. G. Wilson Knight notes the King's violent reaction to Paulina's approach, "as though recognizing his natural enemy"

(84): "I charged thee that she should not come about me. / I knew she would" (2.3.43-44). The latter sentence might be read as an almost comical expression of chagrin. However, Antigonus indicates his respect for his wife with the words, "I let her run / But she'll not stumble" (2.2.52). There are certainly touches of comedy about Paulina, particularly when she argues with the lords for an audience with the King, but at the same time she is seriously presented as a woman with the innate authority to become Leontes's spiritual mentor.

Through Paulina, the seeker of justice, other characters are transformed, re-created, made new. Leontes recognizes her as his conscience incarnate, reminding him of what he has lost through his own most grievous fault. As Maurice Hunt puts it, "Paulina's stinging tongue constitutes the earthly vehicle of Apollo's providence" (88). Dickinson's "Remorse--is Memory--awake--" (#744) is painfully suited to the penitent King's condition. By the time Leontes beholds the statue in Paulina's chapel, he has come to "clearer knowledge" (2.1.98). Paulina is the instrument of Hermione's restoration, whether through her faith in the oracle or through arranging for the Queen's literal seclusion.

The characters of Hermione, Perdita, and Paulina become even more intriguing in light of the various classical echoes within the play. The statue's awakening recalls that of Galatea, the beautiful statue Venus brought to life in pity for the young sculptor Pygmalion. Also, Harold Goddard has pointed out parallels with Euripides' drama of Queen Alcestis who gave her life in the place of her rather selfish husband Admetus, but who was restored because the strong hero Hercules wrestled for her life with



Death himself. In The Winter's Tale, it is Paulina who fights for the Queen's life (272).

By far the most extensive parallel to The Winter's Tale in classical mythology, however, is the story of Demeter and Persephone. Critical consensus is that Shakespeare probably knew them by their Roman names as Ceres and Proserpina from Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Demeter and Persephone were often portrayed with similar features and may have been seen as symbolic of the grain itself at different stages of maturity. This close identification helps clarify Demeter's absence from Olympus while her daughter was in the underworld with Hades. Likewise, in The Winter's Tale, to be without the daughter is to be without the mother; Hermione disappears until Perdita is found. Several critics have independently suggested that Shakespeare's statue scene may have been influenced by the Golding translation's description of Demeter's grief upon learning of her daughter's abduction: "Hir mother stoode as stark as stone when she these newes did heare,/And long was she like one that in another world had beene" (Frey 63; Mahon 215; Neely 187). When Perdita recalls the flowers Proserpine "lett'st fall from Dis's wagon" (4.4.117-118), she herself seems the personification of spring, following the winter's tale of woe. When she and Florizel arrive at her father's court, he greets them with "Welcome hither/As is the spring to the earth" (5.1.151-52).

The cult of Demeter particularly flourished in Sicily, the realm of Shakespeare's Leontes. Kenneth Muir suggests that Shakespeare reversed Greene's two kingdoms of Sicily and Bohemia in order that Hermione would be Queen of Sicily (244). At Enna, near Lake Pergusa, where Persephone

was said to have been captured, a Christian cathedral used to display a Greek statue of Demeter and her child upon the altar, an image obviously closely resembling the Madonna and Child of Christianity (Warner, Alone 276). The Winter's Tale similarly implies that a child of either sex is a treasure beyond price, equally suitable to represent spiritual rebirth.

In the original Homeric Hymn, a version much more consistent with feminism than Ovid's retelling (see Meyer for text and commentary), Paulina's reconciling role is partly taken by Rhea, the mother of Demeter and Zeus. Rhea had outwitted her husband Kronos in his attempt to destroy their children, and is portrayed as remaining in Olympus as queen mother after Kronos' downfall. This wise older woman descends to explain to Demeter the compromise that Persephone may return for part of the year. Rhea says that Zeus promises Demeter whatever honors she chooses among the gods, and prevails with her to make the earth fruitful once more. Thus Rhea is a reconciler, playing an important part in ending the famine and restoring hope to the human race. Demeter then returns to her place in Olympus, as Hermione returns to her place through Paulina's loyal love. It must be remembered that Hermione speaks only after Paulina tells her, "Our Perdita is found" (5.3.122). Since the character of Rhea is omitted in Ovid's account, it would be interesting to discover whether Shakespeare had any means of knowing the Greek version of the myth.

These classical elements in The Winter's Tale enhance the play's feminist implications. There are no comparably detailed mother-daughter stories in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, wherein (as mentioned in Chapter 1), the only mother-daughter pairs are Moses' mother and sister, Herodias

and Salome, and the Syro-Phoenician woman and her daughter of Matthew 15 and Mark 7. Curiously enough, this last story is slightly analogous to that of Demeter and Persephone (one wonders if Shakespeare noticed this parallel). The mother seeks the restoration of her daughter who is possessed by a demon--and like Zeus, Jesus at first responds negatively. This persistent woman is the only person recorded as having changed Jesus' mind about anything. However, Zeus and Leontes are much slower to heed the words of women. Thus, certain consequences of the past are permanent in both the Homeric Hymn and The Winter's Tale. Persephone must be with Hades part of every year; Antigonus and Mamillius remain dead; Leontes has lost sixteen years he might have spent in relationship with his wife and daughter.

Shakespeare's remarkably positive portrayals of mothers of daughters in The Winter's Tale challenge the tendency--running from Scripture to Henry VIII--to value mothers primarily for bearing sons. Ironically, but realistically, Mamillius' death is the crucial factor moving Leontes to repent of rejecting Hermione and Perdita. In several plays Shakespeare uses daughters as symbolic of a new order, but only in The Winter's Tale and to a lesser extent in Pericles does he include the mother in the transformation of the father's potentially tragic character (Frey 167). Carol Neely agrees that in none of the other romances do fully developed mature women characters play such central active roles (192). Elsewhere in the canon, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are among the few heroines much above twenty, but they are not portrayed as mothers. Hermione and Paulina are virtually unique in the

Shakespearean canon (and remain unusual in English and American literature until the twentieth century).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast with Greene's Pandosto and Greek myth, The Winter's Tale unites Christian and feminist values, resulting in a world finally characterized by harmony between men and women. As Patricia Gourlay summarizes the play's dynamics, "to Leontes' dark vision Shakespeare opposes the ideal qualities represented in the play by the three women, Hermione, Paulina, and Perdita, who suggest the subversive and creative power of love, art, and nature" (378). Instead of portraying female sexuality as corrupting, The Winter's Tale demonstrates that male jealousy and pride are corrupting and destructive. Like Christ, Hermione and Perdita are rejected but return after a disappearance, forgiving those who have wronged them. Through Shakespeare's creation of Paulina, the happy community of the final scene is made possible.

Interweaving elements of Greene's Pandosto, the Christian romance, and the Demeter/Persephone myth, Shakespeare has created a panoramic work in which parent-child and male-female relationships are both celebrated, together with sisterhood between women. The play's ending is improbable "like an old tale" (5.3.118), perhaps deliberately reminding us that the reports of another resurrection story were brought by women and at first rejected "as idle tales" (Luke 24:11). As the feminist critic Carolyn Heilbrun eloquently states,

These last plays which have been called the comedies of forgiveness perfectly embody the androgynous world as they do the world of Christian grace. . . . Shakespeare in his last plays

has imagined a world which, because it is androgynous in its spiritual impulses, is redeemable; such worlds are in fact redeemed by androgynous grace. He has given us the blessing of this vision, enabling us to imagine our world infused with new androgynous impulses by which we, too, may find forgiveness and redemption. (33-34)

Although some radical feminists see Shakespeare as strongly representative of his patriarchal society, and some conservative Christians seek to censor his works, Heilbrun's reading of The Winter's Tale is remarkably consistent with Christian feminism. To revise Ben Jonson's famous compliment, Shakespeare's ability to be both of an age and for all time is a measure of his genius.

#### Jane Eyre: Transcending Cinderella

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

Matthew 6:33

"The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. . . . Laws and principles are not for times when there is no temptation."

Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, Chapter 27

To put this World down--like a Bundle--  
And walk steady, away,  
Requires Energy--possibly Agony--  
'Tis the Scarlet way

Trodden with straight renunciation  
By the Son of God--

Dickinson, #527

Jane Eyre is one of the first comparatively realistic novels to share the upside-down values of the Christian Gospel and the wondrous country of folk tales where the first is last and the last is first. In fairy tales, the youngest son or daughter, the weakest animal, the basest metal, the poor and humble are associated with goodness and wisdom; the eldest, the rich, the powerful, the strong are often the stupid and evil ones. Charlotte Bronte re-creates these paradoxes in her compelling story of an orphaned girl who holds fast to her vision of love and integrity despite hardships and social pressures. Often criticized for its unconventionality ever since its publication in 1847, Jane Eyre represents the underground current of Christian feminism made visible through art.

The theme of an individual's struggle for wholeness--characteristic of both Romanticism and Christianity-- is here expressed through a young woman's gradual attainment of a personal understanding of right and wrong. Jane Eyre is much more than a Cinderella tale of a virtuous poor girl marrying a wealthy landowner. Whereas Samuel Richardson's Pamela is instantly willing to wed her would-be seducer and raise her station in life as soon as he proposes marriage, Jane values integrity and thoughtfulness more than money and social status. Influenced by several loving women, she in turn influences her beloved Rochester to renounce his self-centeredness and choose right action for its own sake. When this process is complete, the author reunites the lovers, emphasizing their interdependence and equality.

Jane's story follows the pattern of "Beauty and the Beast" more closely than that of "The Twelve Brothers" in its focus on the power of love to transform the beloved male figure to his truest and best self. As Beauty loves the Beast before his transformation, so Jane loves Rochester despite his shortcomings, in the spirit of the divine love for sinners celebrated in the central romance of Christianity.

Charlotte Bronte's abundant references to Scripture in Jane Eyre have been carefully tabulated by Catherine Brown Tkacz, who finds that the eight biblical books most frequently echoed in the novel are Matthew, Revelation, Genesis, I Corinthians, Luke, Psalms, Exodus, and John (20-25). According to Capps' landmark study of Emily Dickinson's literary allusions, these are the same biblical books she mentions most often in her poems and letters, although in a slightly different order: Matthew, John, Luke, Revelation, Genesis, I Corinthians, Psalms, and Exodus (192-193). Clearly both writers were much drawn to Matthew's Gospel, especially to the Sermon on the Mount, and to Revelation. Even allowing for the possibility of a few questionable allusions in either list, and for the general familiarity with Scripture in the nineteenth century, these findings reflect an important dimension of Dickinson's regard for Charlotte Bronte.

As already indicated in this study, the importance of Dickinson's reading can hardly be overestimated. "Books were not only her friends, they were part of her mental landscape," Dorothy Huff Oberhaus observes (*Emily Dickinson's Books* 62). Similarly, Jane Donahue Eberwein directly proposes that many Dickinson poems "reenact situations she would have remembered from her reading" (113). Like Dickinson's personae, Jane is small,

somewhat plain, simultaneously modest yet self-assured. Although she treasures female friendships, romantic love calls forth her deepest passion, yet she is capable of functioning constructively in its absence. One of her greatest solitary pleasures is in practicing to be a better artist. Because Jane's spiritual development is very hardly won over a period of several years, the Christlikeness of her mature character gains credibility. Considering all these parallels, one can conclude that individual Dickinson poems may well have been written with Jane Eyre's emotions or circumstances in mind, without necessarily asserting or denying that the poet experienced the same situations in her daily life.

Like many other readers, Dickinson would surely have sympathized with the lonely child Jane. Elizabeth Phillips suggests that Poem #773 ("Deprived of other Banquet/ I entertained Myself") and # 612 ("It would have strained a Gnat--/To live as small as I ") strongly correspond with Jane Eyre's plight (101-04). Another possible echo is in #1021:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father  
 Leads the Chosen Child,  
 Oftener through Realm of Briar  
 Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon  
 Than the Hand of Friend  
 Guides the Little One predestined  
 To the Native Land.



This honest admission of pain and tribulation combined with faith is very close in tone and imagery to the servant Bessie's mournful song in Chapter 3 of Jane Eyre, beginning, "My feet they are sore, and my limbs they are weary; / Long is the way, and the mountains are wild" (Bronte 15).

Dickinson's Poem #898 ("How happy I was if I could forget") shares the same tone and sentiments but is more suggestive of the adult Jane Eyre's flight from Thornfield.

At Lowood School Jane suffers with the other girls from the Pharisaic Mr. Brocklehurst's cruel mismanagement, and learns from Miss Temple and Helen Burns to rise above crippling bitterness toward those who have wronged her. Helen's untimely death may be one source of inspiration for Dickinson's elegy poems, such as "She went as quiet as the Dew" (#149). In #1272 ("So proud she was to die") the speaker's emotions are akin to Jane's mixed reactions to Helen's calm acceptance of her lot:

So satisfied to go  
Where none of us should be  
Immediately--that Anguish stooped  
Almost to Jealousy--

During her employment at Thornfield, Jane's courage, wit, and integrity attract the best in her new master, Mr. Rochester, whose love she returns with all of her lonely heart. As she confesses, "I could not, in those days, see God for his creature; of whom I had made an idol (261; ch.24). Judith Farr finds extensive resemblance between Emily Dickinson's Master letters and poems and Jane's passion for Rochester, as well as Charlotte Bronte's emotion for Professor Heger (204).

However, Jane is very ill at ease about her socioeconomic dependence on Rochester. Her discomfort at his desire to shower her with fine clothes and jewels is precisely like the emotion captured in Dickinson's Poem #579, "I had been hungry, all the Years." The "ample Bread--" offered to the speaker is too "unlike the Crumb" she had previously shared with the birds. She continues:

The Plenty hurt me--'twas so new--  
 Myself felt ill and odd--  
 As Berry--of a Mountain Bush--  
 Transplanted--to the Road--

Jane Eyre uses this very metaphor of food later in the novel when she unexpectedly falls heir to her uncle's estate: "I again felt rather like an individual of but average gastronomical powers sitting down to feast alone at a table spread with provisions for a hundred" (365; ch. 33).

When the great test of her character comes--the last-minute discovery that Rochester's mad wife is alive and residing at Thornfield--Jane is able to follow her conscience and make the heartbreaking decision to leave her beloved. As Robert Martin observes, "the issue is never whether Jane should become Rochester's mistress" (83). Whatever a reader's moral perspective might be, the issue is that Jane herself believes it wrong to become a married man's mistress and has the strength to act according to that belief, even though she as yet knows no living relative who might care what she does. Dickinson's recurrent theme of renunciation may in some cases reflect her imaginative empathy with Jane's courageous choice. In "Triumph -- may be of several kinds--" (#455) Dickinson pays tribute to such a decision:

A Triumph--when Temptation's Bribe  
 Be slowly handed back--  
 One eye upon the Heaven renounced--  
 And One--upon the Rack--

Similarly, "To put this World down--like a Bundle-- / . . . Requires Energy-- possibly Agony" like that endured by "the Son of God" (#527). Judith Farr notes that the early "Heart! We will forget him" (#47) is very suited to Jane's situation (206).

Like Helen Burns and Miss Temple, Jane can distinguish between the sin and the sinner. Curiously, many nineteenth-century readers were horrified that the heroine actually forgives the deceiver who nearly seduces her under pretense of marriage. Jane's continued love for Rochester under these circumstances was regarded as a sign, not of her Christianity, but of the author's depravity. It should be noted that Jane also forgives the Reed family and even pities the mad Bertha, telling Rochester that the poor woman "cannot help being mad" (286). Certainly these attitudes echo Christ's example of forgiveness and his instruction to love one's enemies. Moreover, Jane gradually realizes that one's enemy is within as well as without. Gilbert and Gubar convincingly suggest that Bertha is Jane's "dark double," symbolizing the ferocious and revengeful secret self that Jane has been struggling to control since her childhood at Gateshead, for every appearance of Bertha in the novel is juxtaposed with an expression or repression of anger on Jane's part (360).

Jane's flight from Rochester leads her to an unexpected new life. She finds loving relatives for the first time, inherits a small fortune which she

generously shares, and even receives a marriage proposal from her cousin St. John Rivers. Her reluctance to wed this cold-mannered, sternly religious gentleman again shocked some early readers, for Bronte strongly implies that marriage without love is as wrong as love without marriage. Although Jane respects St. John, she wants to be loved for herself, not valued as a means for furthering his missionary effort. (He refrains from proposing to another young woman who genuinely attracts him but who appears less suited for a missionary life). His sisters Mary and Diana at first hope Jane might love St. John, but they understand when she expresses her distaste for being "regarded...but as a useful tool" (398). Nevertheless, Jane says she would marry St. John if she could believe it to be God's will. As she meditates about her predicament, she hears Rochester's voice calling out her name and feels she must go to learn what has happened to him.

In her new circumstances, Jane is able to meet Rochester without that disturbing sense of total dependency on him. His situation has likewise changed, for he has now had the opportunity to follow Jane's example and do right when he had nothing to gain. Without knowing whether he would ever see Jane again, he has unsuccessfully tried to save his mad wife from a fire she started, losing his eyesight and hand as well as Thornfield itself.

When Jane finds him secluded at Ferndean, she joyfully renews a relationship where she can now give as well as receive. Since the barrier of his marriage is removed, there is nothing to keep them apart. Perhaps, as Phillips maintains, Dickinson's Poem #616 ("I rose because he sank") describes the final stage of Jane's romance (106-07). Certainly the erotic dimension of this lyric is consistent with Jane's reunion scenes with

Rochester. In fact, the warmly physical dimension of their love is so much emphasized that there seems little basis for the psychoanalytical view that Rochester's injuries represent symbolic castration (Chase 25). Rather, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, "he is paradoxically stronger than he was when he ruled Thornfield, for now, like Jane, he draws his powers from within himself, rather than from inequity, disguise, deception" (369). A few years later he regains the sight of one eye and is able to see his infant son, perhaps reflecting the healing of his inner vision. (As for St. John, the novel's final paragraphs make clear that Jane's refusal did not seriously disrupt his life).

Many twentieth-century readers may smile at the 1848 review condemning Jane Eyre as a "pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition," filled with "murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which...is a murmuring against God's appointment" (Elizabeth Rigby, qtd. in Campbell 87). Yet similar attitudes continue to thrive in our contemporary society. Margaret Blom criticizes Bronte for extending the "basic Protestant doctrine that the individual needs no mediation between himself and God," so that her characters "are able not only to deny the teachings of the ministers of the Church but to reject or to reinterpret Scripture" (58). Since Luther and Calvin likewise denied some teachings of the Church they knew, and reinterpreted Scripture, one wonders why Bronte should be considered unusually radical in this respect.

Blom further declares that "it is difficult to believe that Charlotte, with her extensive knowledge of Christian doctrine and her familiarity with both Milton and the Bible, was unaware that the situation in which she finally placed her heroine not only celebrates Jane's decision to be governed solely by

her own will but reverses the traditional Christian view of the superiority of man over woman" (103). As Jane continually seeks to do what is right rather than be ruled by her emotions, this pronouncement is baffling. Moreover, why should Charlotte Bronte be required to agree with Milton concerning the proper relations between the sexes? In any case, Milton himself was radical for his time for defending divorce on the grounds of incompatibility in addition to the traditional reason of adultery; he might well have sympathized with a man in Rochester's position. Finally, Blom laments that Rochester at last "worships only Jane" (103), apparently ignoring his lengthy discussion of his relationship with God in the next to last chapter of the novel. That such arguments could be taken seriously in the academic community as recently as 1977 reflects the ignorance of the Christian feminist tradition which the present study attempts to remedy. In her regularly reprinted Preface to the Second Edition, Charlotte Bronte explicitly defended the unconventionality of the novel on religious grounds, declaring that "narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ."

Poor, plain, and unjustly rejected, Jane slowly grows in wisdom, self-discipline, and generosity of spirit through all her difficulties. Courageous, intelligent, and loving, she inspires her lover to follow her example of forgiveness and unselfishness. The transformation of Rochester is as much a ministry as any endeavor of St. John Rivers. Like the Sister of the twelve brothers, Jane Eyre has earned her final happiness by seeking first after righteousness. A loving marriage serves as her reward, but it is not her only

purpose or solace in life. She becomes a worthy role model for persons of either gender--as Emily Dickinson almost certainly recognized.

### Eliot's Heroines--Madness or Divinest Sense?

She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

Proverbs 31:26

"Ah," said Seth, "..and if Dinah had seen as I did, we'd ha' left the Wesleyans and joined a body that'd put no bonds on Christian liberty."

"Nay, lad, nay," said Adam, "she was right and thee wast wrong. There's no rules so wise but it's a pity for somebody or other....and she's thought it right to set the example of submitting, for she's not held from other sorts of teaching. And I agree with her, and approve o' what she did."

Epilogue to Adam Bede

"What should I do--how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain and compel it to silence and think of those three?"

George Eliot, Middlemarch, Chapter 80

Much Madness is divinest Sense--  
To a discerning Eye--

Dickinson, #435

George Eliot's contribution to the tradition of Christlike women in literature is tinged with tragedy. Her realistic explorations of the ways society hampers women in their quest for integrity and justice might be figuratively described as variants of the second half of the story of "The Twelve Brothers," in which the loyal sister is maligned and nearly destroyed

through the efforts of her mother-in-law. Maggie Tulliver literally meets an early death after a life of many frustrations; Dinah Morris and Dorothea Brooke accomplish great good in crisis situations and are admired by their more discerning acquaintances, but their influence is severely limited by circumstances and social conventions. Since Eliot herself overcame numerous obstacles to her own development, many readers have reflected on the discrepancy between her career and those of her female characters who share her courage and intelligence. Perhaps this discrepancy reflects her compassion for women whose struggles resembled yet differed from her own--a compassion not always evident in later feminists. It is not surprising that Eliot inspired profound respect from Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, whose tributes to her contribute to the development of a feminist literary tradition.

In light of Eliot's lifelong questioning of traditional religion, her sympathetic creation of the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris is especially significant. Eliot shares something of Charlotte Bronte's Protestant/Romantic ideal of the self--even the female self--directly seeking Divinity, Right, and Truth, neither blindly following the established views of others, nor arrogantly refusing to consider them. Yet Dinah's individuality goes a step beyond Jane Eyre's, for Jane has no personal vocation to consider combining with marriage. Her uncle's unexpected legacy means that financial dependence will no longer affect her relationship with Rochester, yet it also relieves Jane of the necessity to earn her living. Dinah, though less three-dimensional than Jane, with little of the novel presented from her view, is memorable for her dedication to her chosen vocation of religious



ministry, in addition to working with her hands, like the people to whom she preaches.

Perhaps living on the periphery of her social class (because of her irregular relationship with George Henry Lewes) encouraged Eliot's interest in the lives of working people, so vividly rendered in Adam Bede. Ellen Moers perceptively contrasts Adam Bede with Austen's Emma, in which the heroine disparages the young farmer Robert Martin and discourages Harriet Smith from marrying him (see Moers 74-78). Martin has much in common with Eliot's father and with Adam, a good workman, son, and brother. When Emma drops Harriet off at the Martin farm, to return for her later, Moers points out that if Austen would let us go up the path and enter the buildings, we would be in a world very much like the Poysers' Hall Farm in Adam Bede. "What George Eliot found in Jane Austen was a garden to break out of, a gate to push open, a doorway to enter" (78).

Emily Dickinson would have understood the self-discipline required for Dinah Morris to pursue her religious vocation while meeting her mundane responsibilities. Although the poet did not need to support herself financially, it is often forgotten that American women in her position commonly spent many hours a day in domestic labors that have been greatly simplified for twentieth-century homemakers. As Millicent Todd Bingham emphatically reminds us, "In Emily's day domestic activity was still a full-time career for women" (112). During the 1850s the Dickinsons had no regular household help except for a washerwoman who came once a week (Bingham 116); when this situation changed, Dickinson's poetic activity increased. Bingham regretted that her mother Mabel Todd's editing of the

letters helped to create a mistaken impression of the poet as "detached from practical life. Nothing could be further from the truth. As long as she was able she did her full share of work . . . Her duties could not be slighted" (119). American women of Dickinson's social class and education thus lived somewhat differently from their counterparts in Victorian England--playing a role somewhere in between that of Dinah Morris and her creator George Eliot.

Dinah is given a prominent place in the first chapters of Adam Bede; then she does not appear for some time. She is, of course, very like the Christ she describes, caring for rich and poor, young and old, male and female. She is compassionately concerned for the beautiful and self-centered Hetty Sorrell, like herself an orphaned niece of the Poyser family at Hall Farm. Ultimately it is her effect upon Hetty that best illustrates the merits of Dinah's character. The climactic scene of Hetty's prison confession to Dinah was based upon an experience of Eliot's Methodist aunt, who had befriended a young woman condemned for a similar crime (Bennett 101).

Adam's brother Seth shares Dinah's Methodist faith and asks for her hand in marriage, even promising to "fend indoors and out" so she can devote time to her preaching, but she feels marriage is not God's will for her. Much as Seth cares for Dinah, perhaps Eliot wishes to imply that he does not need her as Adam does, precisely because he is more like her. It is crucial that when Adam comes to love Dinah in the end of the novel, he also promises to support her ministry, even though he himself prefers the Anglican village church, where he is a faithful member of the choir.

The Bede brothers and their mother Lisbeth become increasingly fond of Dinah through her sympathetic visits after the father Thais Bede is accidentally drowned. Adam spends the night of his father's death wrathfully finishing a coffin Thais had neglected to make for a customer, but repents of his self-righteous indignation when he realizes he will never speak to his father again. Adam's tendency to self-righteous anger is sorely tested in the novel's central conflict. While he has been courting Hetty's affections, the vain little dairymaid is gradually seduced by the local squire, Arthur Donnithorne. Arthur later confesses that had he known Adam cared for Hetty, he would have made more effort to control what started as an innocent flirtation. When Adam surprises them embracing in the lane, he is bitterly enraged, but does not know how much has already taken place between them. Thus, while Arthur is away with his regiment, Adam once more attempts to win Hetty's affection and even persuades her to be his betrothed. Shortly before the wedding date, Hetty flees her home to seek Arthur and hide the fact that she will soon bear his child. Her relatives and friends are distraught when they find that Hetty is being brought to trial for the death of her infant. Neither before nor after her death sentence will Hetty confess and explain herself to anyone, for she is completely overwhelmed with misery and despair.

Yet even before committing her crime, Hetty had a fleeting thought that it would not seem so hard if only Dinah knew her shame; only Dinah would not condemn her (371; ch. 37). At first she scarcely responds when Dinah comes to visit her in prison, but through Dinah's gentle touch and loving words Hetty is able to grasp the possibility that God cares as Dinah cares for

her. At last she pours out her story, praying that God will take from her memory the sound of the baby crying as she had left it in a wood, half covered with leaves and branches, faintly hoping someone might find it before it died of exposure. Dinah stays with her until the morning she is to be executed, when Arthur Donnithorne, through an honest effort to take some responsibility for his misguided behavior, obtains a lightening of Hetty's sentence. Instead of being hanged, she is transported to labor somewhere in the colonies (445; ch. 48), where she dies a few years later.

Both Eliot and Dickinson emphasize the potentially constructive effects of great sorrow. Adam's suffering is an "indestructible force, only changing its form, and passing from pain into sympathy." Such sorrow "becomes a habit of our lives. . . and we are contented with our day when we have been able to bear our grief . . . and act as if we were not suffering" (460; ch. L). His pain has increased his sensitivity to the pain of others, his patience with their shortcomings, and his affection for his mother and Seth. Similar consequences of suffering are mentioned in Emily Dickinson's Poem # 561 ("I measure every grief I meet / With narrow, probing, Eyes"). The speaker's sorrows have made her deeply aware of "the fashions--of the Cross / And how they're mostly worn-- / Still fascinated to presume / That Some--are like My Own--."

In the final chapters of the novel, Adam and Dinah slowly recognize a growing love for one another and at last are married, to the delight of old Mrs. Bede and the generous-hearted Seth, who has long accepted that Dinah would not be his. The credibility of this conclusion, and of Dinah's character, might easily be questioned and deserves some consideration. Joan Bennett

wisely observes that Eliot did not portray Adam and Dinah alike, and thus if they are considered unrealistic or unsympathetic, it cannot be for the same reasons. It is not Dinah's actions, but the author's commentary on her goodness and the semi-biblical idiom of her speech that unintentionally may make her seem self-conscious about her virtue; in fact, the opening chapter emphasizes the simplicity of her demeanor, free of the "smile of conscious saintship" or of "denunciatory bitterness" (33). On the other hand, the author intentionally makes Adam self-righteous and allows this flaw to be purged by tragic events. Thus, Bennett convincingly concludes that the marriage is artistically justified to complete the development of Adam's character and illustrate his increased ability to see women as they really are (Bennett 107-11).

Admittedly, Dinah is a rather static character until the final chapters; nor do we hear much about how she came to develop into the personality that we see. Yet our view of Dinah is crucial to our understanding of the novel. It may indeed be difficult for many readers to identify with her, to imagine being her, but it is not so impossible to imagine knowing her. If we, like the other characters, look at her from the outside, she does not seem so unrealistic. It may be noted that Virginia Woolf saw something very like perfection in her mother and her sister Stella, even though after their deaths she tried to understand and express the flaws in that perception. During their lives she could not see them from the inside, just as readers cannot see Dinah from the inside. We are obliged to accept Dinah's goodness as a mystery, yet a reality in light of the effects she has upon others, most notably Hetty.

As the sister of the twelve brothers was considered eccentric and even evil for pursuing her personal mission, Dinah is regarded as peculiar by most of her acquaintances. However, both women bring about positive transformations of other characters. Like the husband of the folktale sister, Adam at last comes to see Dinah as she really is. His mother Lisbeth discerns their growing love before Adam himself is conscious of it, remarking to the surprised Seth, "He knowsna I put salt in's broth, but he'd miss it pretty quick if it warn't there" (468; ch. 51). Precisely the same theme appears in Dickinson's #224 ("I've nothing else--to bring, You know--"). Her poems, like the stars, might be missed if they "didn't come" to light the "way Home" for future readers. Lisbeth also likens Dinah to the picture in Adam's Bible of the angel seated on the stone that was rolled away from Christ's tomb.

In the Evangelical tradition, where Scripture is the highest source of authority, it is taken for granted that religious institutions might be right or wrong on any given issue at any given time, and that true religion is at least as likely to reject as to uphold the status quo of society. However, it is not Dinah's Methodist doctrines that Eliot exalts, but her selfless concern for others and sincere seeking to live according to the will of God. She provides a significant contrast to Mr. Irwine, the local rector, who although a good well-meaning man, is utterly unable to reach the despairing Hetty as Dinah can. To his credit, Mr. Irwine respects her ministry, realizing that one "might as well go and lecture the trees for their own shape" rather than claim Dinah's preaching and teaching to be unnatural. (97; ch. 8) Dinah defends her calling by saying that "it isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit"

(95). In every respect, Dinah's strong sense of vocation would have provided an encouraging example for Emily Dickinson.

Ironically, sometime between the wedding of Adam and Dinah and the epilogue's final glimpse of their happy marriage seven years later, the Methodist Conference formally prohibits women from preaching in public, although they may still give spiritual guidance in homes. This ruling provokes strikingly different reactions in Seth and Adam, and is strangely overlooked by many critics. Even Moers comments that Dinah gives up her career with "a flutter of glad submission, for George Eliot was no feminist" (295). Yet Eliot emphasizes that Dinah's marriage has nothing to do with the close of her preaching career; she was extremely hesitant to marry anyone precisely lest it might in any way hinder her vocation. "I fear I should forget the Divine presence and seek no love but yours, " she explains to Adam, saying that marriage is holy for those called to it, "but I am called to another path" (479; ch. 52). One of Emily Dickinson's letters to Judge Lord conveys very similar sentiments: "It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread" (L#562). Although Dickinson never concluded that marriage was the best course for herself, it must be remembered that she and Lord were much older than Adam and Dinah were at their autumnal wedding.

Dinah's acceptance of the decision of the Methodist Conference contributes to several significant themes. First, Dinah evidently realizes the drawback to Seth's suggestion that they leave the Methodists for some newer and more broad-minded sect. Carried to its logical conclusion, this reasoning could lead to splintering from splinter groups indefinitely rather than

working together for common goals despite disagreements. Furthermore, as Harvey points out, the plot has demonstrated that Dinah's public preaching has sometimes had questionable and temporary effects (as in the case of Bessy Cranage, so emotionally overcome by Dinah's sermon early in the novel), whereas the great influence of her character has been better evident upon persons who do not attend Methodist services and have never heard her full-length sermons (172). "You're one as is allays welcome in trouble, Methodist or no Methodist," her aunt Poyser remarks (100; ch.8).

Finally, Eliot underlines an important difference between the Bede brothers. Although Seth shares Dinah's Methodist beliefs, he thinks she should follow his advice rather than her own conscience concerning the Conference ruling. Adam defers to Dinah's judgment and refrains from criticizing the Methodists as a whole because of this matter. Even before he realized the depth of his new love for Dinah, he thought she should make her own decision about when to leave Hall Farm and return to Snowfield. Subsequently, he left her to think over her decision about marrying him, without further insistence from him. Now his respect for her decision to abide by the ruling of the Methodist authorities is consistent with these earlier indications that he honors Dinah's discernment as a mature individual. Today a woman like Dinah would almost certainly be ordained, changing her church affiliation if necessary, but it is credible that she submits to the Conference for the sake of supporting the overall goals and reforms of Methodism during its formative period. Surely the final relationship of Dinah and Adam approaches the ideal of marriage held by modern Christian feminists.



In Eliot's next novel, The Mill on the Floss, the heroine Maggie Tulliver has something in common with the suffering Jesus but not with the triumphant image of "Christus Victor" or the sister of "The Twelve Brothers." However, it is understandable that Maggie's tragic story was particularly beloved by Emily Dickinson, according to her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who names it as one of the few volumes kept on the mantel shelf in the poet's bedchamber.

No one who knew Emily in life could ever forget her tenderness for Maggie Tulliver, whose adoration for her only brother Tom paralleled the deep affection between Emily and her only brother Austin. . . . A mere mention of . . .the ill-fated love of Maggie and Philip Wakem never failed to bring a haunted look to her face--as if she recalled the pain of an actual cruelty to those she had loved.  
(302)

Maggie's renunciation of Philip and later of Stephen Guest, her cousin's fiance, was encouraged by her reading of the Imitation of Christ by the fifteenth-century monk Thomas a Kempis. This too, according to Bianchi (302), was one of the small group of books kept on Dickinson's bedroom mantel. Whatever Marian Evans privately thought of the Imitation, Bianchi is probably correct in emphasizing its influence on Emily Dickinson's character. This classic of fifteenth-century Catholicism eloquently delineates the same embracing of self-denial and rejection of self-indulgence that Bingham describes as central to the poet's Puritan heritage (43). If Bianchi is accurate in stating that Eliot's novel moved Emily to ask Susan Dickinson for a copy of the Imitation (302), we have a glimpse of the poet pursuing her

spiritual search through her reading rather than through conventional institutional channels. Both Sue's 1857 copy and the one she gave Emily in 1876 contain many of the light pencilled vertical markings characteristic of several books owned by the poet (Capps 61-62). Thus, it seems possible that some of Dickinson's numerous renunciation poems, such as #745 (Renunciation--is a piercing Virtue--) and #853 ("When One has given up One's life"), were inspired by her imaginative response to her reading, not necessarily by personal experiences similar to Maggie's. Even if she did survive some tragic romance, her niece recalls her "accomplished cheerfulness," surmising that her "unfailing demeanor in her daily life" may have been related to her perusal of the Imitation of Christ. "In certain moods she would likely have tossed up the crown for the immediate earthly gift withheld her," Bianchi acknowledges, yet, echoing one of Dickinson's frequent metaphors, she concludes, "That her soul had a guest has never been doubted" (303). On the whole, Dickinson seems to have been less ascetic than Thomas a Kempis--or Maggie Tulliver--for she clearly shares Eliot's creative appreciation for the most commonplace moments of human existence. In Chapter 20 of Middlemarch, Eliot eloquently maintains, "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (191). Dickinson expresses similar awareness in Poem # 1284:

Had we the eyes within our Head--  
 How well that we are Blind--  
 We could not look upon the Earth--  
 So utterly unmoved.

Both writers combined this reverence for daily miracles with a rejection of social restrictions on women's lives.

Dorothea Brooke of Middlemarch is at least as constrained by society as Dinah Morris, despite--or because of--her higher social and economic position, but she is certainly more fortunate than Maggie Tulliver. As Lee Edwards succinctly says, Dorothea seeks "to be simultaneously wise, useful, and good" (91). Like Austen and Bronte, Eliot did not portray a world in which her heroine could become a hero, transforming society for the better rather than transforming single individuals (Edwards 102).

Eliot's metaphor comparing Dorothea to a "cygnet. . .reared uneasily among the ducklings" (viii; "Prelude") would understandably have attracted Emily Dickinson, who more playfully described herself as "the only Kangaroo among the Beauty" (L#268). Deeply concerned about social justice, the idealistic and unconventional Dorothea longs to marry a man whom she can help in bringing about great reforms. However, the aging ivory-tower scholar Casaubon is utterly incapable of being the teacher and master she had anticipated. Jealous of Dorothea's innocent friendship with his young relative Will Ladislaw, Casaubon dies leaving a codicil in his will which prohibits Dorothea from inheriting his property if she ever marries Ladislaw.

Eliot contrasts Dorothea's situation with that of Lydgate, an ambitious young doctor who marries the vain self-centered beauty Rosamond Vincy.

For a man like Lydgate, as Bennett points out, marriage is irrelevant to his plans for the future except that it limits his economic freedom. For a woman like Dorothea with similarly earnest aspirations, marriage is the only career open to her, so she thinks it paramount to choose a mate through whom she can serve the world (165).

When Lydgate is suspected of taking bribes to conceal a murder, Dorothea believes in his integrity, financially supports his work, and visits Rosamond to comfort and encourage her. Shocked to find Will Ladislaw seemingly engaged in amorous conversation with Rosamond, Dorothea leaves the house in great distress. After a long night of suffering, she brings herself to set her own pain aside and think only of the other three persons involved. In this crisis she is paradoxically free at last to ask the question "What should I do . . . now, this very day . . . ?" ( 764; ch. 53), whereas she had formerly asked herself, "What can I indirectly help a man to do?"

Emily Dickinson's Poem #126, though written several years before Middlemarch, celebrates just such courageous struggles:

To fight aloud is very brave--  
 But gallanter, I know  
 Who charge within the bosom  
 The Cavalry of Woe--

Dorothea's spiritual victory for the sake of others brings unexpected joy to herself as well. Because Dorothea returns to Rosamond the next day to complete her errand in Lydgate's behalf, Rosamond is utterly humbled for the first time in her life. Their conversation is one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, comparable to Dinah's prison scene with Hetty. Shattered by

Dorothea's generosity, Rosamond explains that Will was rejecting her indiscreet advances and expressing his whole-hearted devotion to Dorothea. She is now convinced of her husband's good name if only because Dorothea affirms his character.

Soon afterwards Dorothea marries Ladislaw, regardless of the neighbors' opinions and the loss of Casaubon's wealth. Although their marriage is happy, Eliot clearly deplors the wasted talents of women like Dorothea. In the novel's Finale, Eliot realistically sums up her heroine's situation: "Many who knew her thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another and be known only in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done" (809). Perhaps when Emily Dickinson affectionately addressed the unmarried Louise Norcross as "Mrs. Ladislaw" (L#401), she similarly combined a compliment with the implication that the rest of the world failed to recognize her cousin's merits sufficiently.

Certainly Dorothea is both remarkably like and sadly unlike the sister of the twelve brothers. She is motivated throughout by her passionate sense of justice, believing that she cannot enjoy the good things of life unless she can find ways to share them with those less fortunate. Although she is continually hindered from fulfilling her dreams of service, she meets the challenge of personal suffering heroically. Her concern for Lydgate and Rosamond as fellow human beings resembles the sister's selfless concern for her brothers. In each case, the burden is not imposed externally, but chosen freely. As the sister nearly loses her husband's love, Dorothea fears she has

lost Ladislaw. In the end, like the folktale sister, Dorothea has metaphorically saved her brother and sister and renewed her relationship with her beloved. Yet in the all too real world of Middlemarch, Dorothea cannot be said to have earned a kingdom or affected the course of history in the style of a St. Theresa.

Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have observed that for Eliot the "man/God" is not the exclusive symbol of incarnation. They suggest that her interest in the Virgin Mary and St. Theresa (with whom Dorothea is compared) reflects an "attempt to discover a symbol of uniquely female divinity" (468). Yet Eliot shows us how society prevents Dorothea from being a completely adequate symbol of this kind. Nevertheless, Dorothea's most fully Christlike action--voluntarily returning to Rosamond's house on her unselfish errand--inspires Rosamond to follow her example of self-sacrifice and tell both Dorothea and Ladislaw the truth of the situation.

Lydgate marvels at Dorothea's capacity for "a fountain of friendship towards men," distinct from romantic passion (#746; ch. 76). Emily Dickinson's letters similarly reflect a remarkable capacity for friendships with men, especially considering the larger society's tendency to assign men and women to separate spheres of influence. Some Victorian readers felt that Dorothea and Lydgate are meant to seem the ideal couple, since both are eager to serve humanity, and Dorothea would be a far more sympathetic wife than Rosamond (Harvey 128). Yet it seems doubtful that Eliot intended this interpretation. F. R. Leavis, among others, has observed that Lydgate's misalliance with Rosamond is no other than poetic justice, in light of his perception of women as charming creatures whose role is to provide

relaxation from his more serious interests (66). One might conclude that if Lydgate lacks the judgment to see Rosamond's shallowness or seek out a more serious bride, he deserves what he gets. Furthermore, Eliot may be satirizing the very concept that a man should find a wife whose existence will be absorbed in his, ensuring the happiness and the usefulness of his life. In fact, Will Ladislaw, much slower than Lydgate to find any vocation other than devotion to Dorothea, may be intended as precisely the kind of personality that would make a perfect traditional wife for an ambitious professional man with Dorothea's traits and talents!

There has been considerable critical consensus that Ladislaw is among the less well-drawn of Eliot's characters. Whereas some Victorians thought him a deliberate anti-climax, a second-best match for Dorothea in comparison to Lydgate, modern readers feel that Eliot merely fails to demonstrate the merit that she asserts in Ladislaw (Harvey 141). Certainly Eliot appears to approve of Ladislaw and tries to make it plausible that Dorothea would love him. As Joan Bennett observes, he is a spontaneous Romantic, loving natural beauty and nobility of human character, a lively contrast to Casaubon, and in many ways complementary to Dorothea (177). Above all, he values Dorothea at her worth instead of criticizing her unconventionality as many other characters do, just as in Reformist theology one is saved not by being perfect but by being in relationship to that which is perfection.

Furthermore, as Raymond Williams shrewdly comments, Ladislaw is "an offense" to rigidly traditional definitions of manhood. Williams correctly notes the frequency with which critics refer to Ladislaw's hair in "exactly" the "tone we've heard often . . . about young men in the sixties; and in fact there's

a connection. For Ladislav is a free man . . . a man who is wholly responsive. He isn't tied by property. . . . He's not of 'good birth' and doesn't try to depend on it. He has nothing on his side but his own feelings, his own actions, yet he understands art and learning better than Casaubon and reforms much better than Brooke" (93). He is akin to the gypsy rover of old ballads, the "green world lover" described by Annis Pratt as an archetype of women's literature, more to be desired than the conventional men who represent easily corrupted social institutions (see Pratt 16-24).

In short, the marriage of Dorothea and Ladislav promises to be "as egalitarian as an individual solution can make it in nineteenth-century England" (Pearson and Pope 131). By Victorian society's standards Dorothea's choice was barely acceptable, and Eliot's own "individual solution" was much less so. Ahead of her time, she anticipated the view that women have the right and the responsibility to serve the world according to their own consciences and gifts, not only indirectly through husbands and sons.

Emily Dickinson's choice to avoid the claims of marriage entirely and devote herself to the life of the mind has also been seen as abnormal, particularly before the rise of feminist criticism; it is little wonder that she exclaims in Poem #435:

Much Madness is divinest Sense--  
 To a discerning Eye--  
 Much Sense--the starkest Madness . . .

These lines, so applicable to Dinah and Dorothea as well as to the poet herself, echo St. Paul's paradoxical saying that "the foolishness of God is



wiser than men. . . . God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise" (I Cor. 1:25, 27).

Dickinson's well-known exclamation, "'What do I think of Middlemarch? What do I think of glory?" (L# 389), exemplifies her love of reading for emotional release and elation of spirit, according to Jane Donahue Eberwein (76). Betsy Erkkila suggests that Eliot was for Dickinson "a Christlike figure" whose works represented "art's redemptive and immortalizing power" (62). At the same time, this poet--who so often is seen as the precursor of twentieth-century skepticism--reflected upon Eliot's death: "The gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she receives in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven" (L#710). Dickinson herself seems to have retained a strangely childlike "joy" in "the mere sense of living" throughout her earthly existence (qtd. by Higginson, L#342a).

Virginia Woolf, the mother of modern feminist criticism, describes all Eliot's heroines as "incomplete versions of their creator" ("George Eliot" 76). In her masterpiece To the Lighthouse, Woolf addresses the question Eliot raised but left unanswered: What must be changed in order to enable women to develop into all they are meant to be and serve freely where they feel called?

### Aurora Leigh: A Revisionist Model

And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush . . .

And he said, Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

Exodus 3:2, 5

. . . Earth's crammed with heaven,  
 And every common bush afire with God,  
 And only he who sees takes off his shoes,  
 The rest sit round it and eat blackberries.

Aurora Leigh (7.821-24)

The Red upon the Hill  
 Taketh away my will--  
 If anybody sneer--  
 Take care--for God is here--  
 That's all.

Dickinson, #155

With the advent of women's studies, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel, Aurora Leigh has risen out of the shadows of neglect like the dawn for which its heroine is named. Browning's extensive influence on numerous other women writers, including Emily Dickinson and Elisabeth Stuart Phelps, has long been known and for that reason alone her work deserves closer examination. As Ellen Moers declared in her groundbreaking Literary Women, Aurora Leigh is "the feminist novel." To the tradition of Christlike women in literature, it contributes a remarkably independent heroine who successfully integrates her quest for artistic excellence with romantic love and sisterhood. Like the sister of the twelve brothers, she rejects her patriarchal inheritance and represents the possibility of a new community.

Aurora's fictional autobiography explores and to some extent resolves many polarities--England and Italy, aesthetic delight in the world and active

social reform, professional vocation and romantic love, the blind worship of handmaid to Master and the mature love of equals. Moreover, it is an extremely allusive work in which reading and writing play an unusually large part. Ironically, Browning was faulted for plagiarising from such works as Mme. de Stael's Corinne, George Sand's novels, Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth, and Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (Cooper 146), yet Margaret Reynolds' excellent critical introduction points out that all these echoes from women's writings in Aurora Leigh are implicit, whereas there are many explicit references to male authors (50). One suspects that many famous women have followed a similar pattern, drawing upon well-known male contributors to their field, yet also shaped by more unobtrusive female influences.

Apparently Browning's early detractors were uncomfortable with the signs of a female tradition discernible in her work. For example, the character of Marian Erle recalls the heroine of Gaskell's Ruth, a work the poet much admired, although the circumstances of their single motherhood are quite different and contribute to differing themes as well as similar ones. As a further irony, Emily Dickinson has also been accused of plagiarising from Browning and other writers, notably by John Evangelist Walsh in The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (1971), but Dickinson's use of literary tradition has been more thoughtfully explored and defended by several more recent critics--for example, Moers (84-95), Eberwein (73-93), and Phillips (99-

132). The present study suggests that the impact of Aurora Leigh's themes and characterization on Emily Dickinson is at least as significant as the younger poet's borrowing of brief phrases and images from Browning.

Two fascinating monographs by Tricia Lootens and Linda Lewis have recently examined Browning's stature and influence as a religious poet. Although she considered herself unconventional in her beliefs, and generally avoided involvement in established churches, she saw herself as a member of "Christ's invisible church" (Lewis 12-13). Certainly she learned very early from her extensive classical and biblical reading that Wisdom has traditionally been conceived as female, and Lewis identifies Aurora Leigh as her "ultimate Athena/Sophia figure" (194). Lootens points out that Browning's secular canonization as a literary saint ironically rested on the neglect of Aurora Leigh and other works that have been perceived as incompatible with her romanticized image (12). This fate is not limited to women writers; even Shakespeare was purged of passages offending the sensibilities of various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers (20). However, in Browning's case, her dramatization of Aurora Leigh as female poet-prophet was clearly flying in the face of the prevailing tradition that female sainthood is defined by submissive suffering and piety rather than by nonconformist speech and action. Yet Lootens notes that female saints had often rebelled against earthly authorities (46), and Lewis calls attention to

the recurring image of the female savior-figure in unorthodox nineteenth-century sects such as the Shakers (173). Such counter-trends are consistent with Aurora Leigh's positive reception by many contemporary readers, including Emily Dickinson.

Aurora Leigh's mixed heritage is essential to her characterization, symbolizing the possibility of harmonizing other socially constructed dualisms. Although the marriage of her English father and Italian mother may well be idealized in the young Aurora's imagination, it reinforces her refusal to settle for anything less rewarding. As she tells Romney, "I have not seen / so much love since" (2.. 397-8). Why is Romney's love unsatisfactory? It is true that his companionship had lent welcome variety to her circumscribed existence with her stern aunt, but they have long argued about the shortsightedness of one another's approach to life. Aurora once "bade him mark that howsoe'er the world / Went ill, as he related, certainly / The thrushes still sang in it" (1.1113-5). Romney, dedicated to righting social injustices, accuses her of being unfeeling, "hard / To general suffering" (2.198-9). From the female sex, he expostulates, "We get no Christ from you-- and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind." (2.224-25). Of course, later events indicate that he is mistaken.

Clearly Aurora is as courageous and unconventional as the folktale sister who saved her brothers. She will not be dissuaded from her own

chosen quest, even if it costs her a relationship which at some level she greatly desires. Aurora learns from her aunt that Romney's father (regretting that Aurora's father had been disinherited on account of his Italian marriage) had long ago asked that the baby Aurora wed his son and thus not lose all that she should have by right. Seeing Romney's marriage proposal in light of this information, the independent Aurora is even more determined to refuse him. When her aunt suddenly dies, Aurora rejects Romney's sincere attempt to share the Leigh patrimony with her. She goes away to London to pursue her own career, even as the sister of the folktale departed from the patriarchal kingdom to seek her own way in the world.

After contriving to become a very successful writer, Aurora finds herself unexpectedly drawn into facing the social inequalities which so concern her cousin. The unscrupulous Lady Waldemar, in love with Romney herself, appeals to Aurora to help prevent him from marrying a poor working-class girl as a sign of his commitment to his philanthropic ideals. To her credit, Aurora is so touched by Marian that she controls her mixed feelings and generously endorses the marriage. But Marian mysteriously disappears on the day of the wedding, and it is Aurora who finds her in Paris nearly two years later. Lady Waldemar had thoroughly discouraged her from going through with the marriage, and then sent someone to take her away, apparently on false pretexts, for the unfortunate young woman was raped

and abandoned. Ironically, her beautiful child is her one source of consolation. Again, Aurora is courageously unconventional (after her initial shock) and sympathetically offers Marian a home. Lewis very realistically calls attention to the enormous domestic adjustment required of an unmarried professional writer who takes in another woman and a small child (207). Aurora also writes a scathing letter to Lady Waldemar, who is rumored to have persuaded Romney to an engagement with her after all.

In turn, Marian is in some ways Aurora's savior. Her spirited refutation of Aurora's negative judgement of her single motherhood shames the latter into the sisterly compassion Romney had said she lacked. Considering that Marian was raped, not even seduced as was Gaskell's Ruth, she is hardly to blame for her situation. All Aurora's writing has been in her father's country and in his language (Reynolds 39), but in her mother's land Marian helps her to a reconciliation with her womanhood (41). The reciprocity of their relationship is foreshadowed in a pair of similes wherein each leads the other through the city streets as if "by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters" (5.482-3; 500-3). Moers and Phillips suggest that Dickinson's Poem #875 ("I stepped from Plank to Plank") alludes to this passage (88; 123). Like many modern feminists, Aurora faces the challenge of attaining opportunities formerly reserved for men yet without rejecting positive qualities that women have developed despite their generally inferior

position in society. Nevertheless, unlike many modern feminists, Browning acknowledges that sisterhood is not everything. As Stephenson notes, Aurora remains lonely and ill at ease even with Marian's companionship (102)

The final sections of the narrative are devoted to Romney's re-entrance into the two women's lives. Contrary to rumor, he is not engaged to Lady Waldemar, but rather intends to fulfill his duty to marry Marian as he originally planned to do--even though it is becoming clear that his heart still lies with Aurora.. Marian tests the two cousins' characters by asking if both are truly willing that she wed Romney, and then eloquently declines to do so. Thus, all three in turn express their willingness to sacrifice personal desires for the sake of others. Marian's independence and self-esteem have increased sufficiently to let her see that her blindly worshipful gratitude to Romney is not the feeling on which a marriage should be based. (Her other concern is to protect her beloved child from ever comparing himself with younger brothers and sisters who would be fortunate enough to receive their own father's care). The difference between the relationship Romney and Marian would have had and the relationship he and Aurora have become capable of sharing is uncannily like the difference between Emily Dickinson's painful "Master" letters and her later letters to Judge Lord. Both situations illuminate the contrast between a relationship characterized by one-sided dependency and a companionship grounded in reciprocal respect.



Like Oedipus, the physically blinded Romney can see truth more clearly than before; in particular, he now acknowledges the value of artists' contributions to the world, praising Aurora's latest book with sacramental metaphors of bread and wine (8.265-69). Thus, as Stephenson observes, Aurora's youthful choice of art over love is vindicated, for their mature relationship is possible only because of what each has learned over the intervening ten years (116). Aurora will not be handmaiden to a master, but rather sister and spouse to her beloved. As in the tale of the sister and her twelve brothers, neither will return to the land of patriarchy, as the literal destruction of Leigh Hall effectively symbolizes. The narrative concludes with the lovers' vision of a New Jerusalem, to be built up through the integration of love and work.

In Aurora Leigh, as in her personal life, Elizabeth Barrett Browning affirms the compatibility of Romanticism and feminism. Margaret Reynolds points out that the poet's formative years of reading filled her imagination with Romantic--literally pre-Victorian--approaches to art, love, and nature. She appropriated the Romantic concepts of the divinely inspired poet-prophet, the importance of individual experience, and the sense of divine immanence in all of nature (Reynolds 12-13). Like William Blake, Browning was interested in the religious philosophies of Swedenborg, who held that love makes humans more fully spiritual and that conjugal love is more holy

than celibacy. In retrospect, Aurora Leigh might be said to re-envision some of Blake's prophecies in a concrete nineteenth-century setting, firmly claiming equality of the sexes in poetic discourse.

Whether by coincidence or not, the very first lines of Aurora Leigh virtually provide a paradigm for Emily Dickinson's poetic career. Margaret Reynolds has noted the separation between Aurora the protagonist and Aurora the writer (33), who purportedly is composing the entire narrative

. . . for my better self  
 As when you paint your portrait for a friend,  
 Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
 Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
 To hold together what he was and is. (1.4-8)

Although Dickinson shared a fair number of her poems with relatives and friends, she seems to have written in part for her own future self. Over the years she returned to the drawer to reconsider her creations and organize them into packets, perhaps to "hold together" a record of her changing moods as well as some of her responses to her reading.

The young Aurora's gifts likewise were strengthened by voracious reading. She would escape from her aunt's supervision to her chamber "and prayed / My prayers without the vicar; read my books, / Without considering whether they were fit / To do me good" (1.699-702). The benefits of reading

are real enough, but Aurora explains that they come not from conscious calculation, but "rather when / We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge / Soul-forward, headlong" (705-7) into the book. It is easy enough to see that Dickinson would have welcomed this line of argument. Romney's eucharistic metaphor for Aurora's book suggests that the riches gained from reading are like sacramental grace, freely given rather than controlled by the recipient. Dickinson uses similar imagery in Poem #1587:

He ate and drank the precious Words--

His Spirit grew robust--

He knew no more that he was poor,

Nor that his frame was Dust--

Emily Dickinson could bake bread so excellent her father would eat no other, but she knew that not even women live by bread alone. This is the lesson Romney learns, whether or not Edward Dickinson ever did.

With a fair-mindedness worth the consideration of later feminists, Browning shows that Romney's good intentions, even before he is humbled by experience, can yield at least some positive consequences. Marian tells Aurora of his kind words and practical assistance when she was in the hospital with nowhere to turn upon her release:

. . .common words, perhaps;

The ministers in church might say the same;

But he, he made the church with what he spoke,-- (3.1212-14)

This non-institutional definition of church would have been congenial to Emily Dickinson, who wrote of keeping the Sabbath in the orchard (#324) and seeing God in the "Red upon the Hill" (#155). In the latter poem, one is tempted to see a double meaning in the final stanza:

The Breaking of the Day

Addeth to my Degree--

If any ask me how--

Artis--who drew me so--

Must tell!

Here the "Breaking of the Day" might contain a playful reference to Aurora's name as well as alluding to the literal dawn. In any case, the speaker's joyous response to so-called secular beauty is attributed to the divine "Artist."

Equally unconventional is Aurora's description of literary success. Art must not be created "for praise or hire," she muses:

Eschew such serfdom. What the poet writes,

He writes: mankind accepts it if it suits,

And that's success: if not, the poem's passed

From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,

Until the unborn snatch it, crying out  
 In pity on their fathers' being so dull,  
 And that's success too. (5.261-7)

Again, Browning's lines could hardly be more descriptive of Emily Dickinson's literary fate; the latter's own poetic expressions of her prophetic vocation will be explored more fully in another chapter of this study. Considering that, unlike Aurora Leigh, Dickinson experienced neither fame nor marriage during her lifetime, her gallantry of spirit appears the more remarkable. Jane Donahue Eberwein makes the intriguing suggestion that Poem #944's daydream of marital felicity may be partly a fantasy of Aurora's and Romney's future life together. The closing reference to "Dawn" might support this possibility:

This seems a Home--  
 And Home is not--  
 But what that Place could be--  
 Afflicts me--as a Setting Sun--  
 Where Dawn--knows how to be--

In any event, the poem seems to indicate that Dickinson had a clear vision of what her dedicated life cost her.

Of course, the conflict between love and art afflicts women disproportionately, not because it is biologically inherent, but because of socially constructed stereotypes and role expectations. Browning implies that these social constructions are not monolithic, however; Aurora remarks that "if Cervantes had been Shakspeare too, he had made his Don a Donna" (7.226-7). Indeed, the spirit of feminist criticism was very much alive in

many young Victorian women, despite the restrictions on their lives, as Lootens illustrates through an amusing anecdote. A publication known as the Girl's Own Paper ran a contest in which readers were encouraged to submit essays on their favorite Shakespearean heroines. To the considerable astonishment of the staff, the heroines who successfully overcome their difficulties were six times more popular among the essayists than those who meet with tragic deaths, with Portia well in the lead. Not incidentally, the excellence of the essays greatly exceeded the judges' expectations as well (Lootens 104). One surmises many of these same young women must have shared Emily Dickinson's enthusiasm for Aurora Leigh--without necessarily rejecting the Sonnets from the Portuguese.

In short, Browning demonstrated for her contemporaries the possibility of being effectively revisionist rather than radical. She implies that romantic love is important, but that traditional male/female relationships must be modified (Stephenson 2). She also reinterpreted traditional religion rather than repudiating it, giving new life to the concept of divine immanence in all of creation. As Aurora meditates, "every common bush" is "afire with God," and those who see the burning bush are called to be prophets. Browning's use of floral imagery may serve as synecdoche for this revisionist model. She can appropriate something so associated with traditional femininity as flowers and transform it into a vehicle for subversive creativity.

From childhood on, Aurora Leigh "drew / The elemental nutriment and heat/From nature (1.473-5). When Romney persists in asking her to be his "flower" and shed her "perfume" in his home (2.827, 832), she turns the image to her own advantage:

But certain flowers grow near as deep as trees,  
 And, cousin, you'll not move my root, not you,  
 With all your confluent storms. Then let me grow  
 Within my wayside hedge, and pass your way! (II.848-51)

Later, upon meeting Marian Erle, Aurora inwardly exclaims, "Such soft flowers, / From such rough roots?" (3.806-07). Marian herself uses a more disparaging image to express her amazement at Romney's notice of her: "There's none can like a nettle as a pink / Except himself. We're nettles, some of us (3.853-54). In a marvelous irony, Lady Waldemar unintentionally softens the same metaphor when she later warns the girl, "You take a pink, / You dig about its roots and water it / And so improve it to a garden pink, / But will not change it to a heliotrope" (6.1044-7). Thus she convinces Marian of her unsuitability for Romney and arranges for her to leave the city.

After Marian's disappearance and figurative death through rape, she eventually reappears in a Parisian flower market and is persuaded to share Aurora's home. As she resumes a semi-normal life, her passionate maternity recalls the image of the Madonna whose name resembles hers. Aurora lovingly tells of Marian and the child gathering flowers for her in the early mornings in an unsuccessful effort to gladden her spirits.

In the end Aurora attains happiness upon realizing she has exalted her "artist's instinct" at the cost / Of putting down the woman's. . . . Flower from root, / And spiritual from natural, grade by grade / In all our life" (9.646-51). In Joyce Zonana's paraphrase, "Heaven is to be gained not by abandoning but by embracing earth" (245). Aurora's long involvement with Marian's unjustly oppressed life has led her to greater understanding of Romney's philanthropic

perspective, just as he has come to a better understanding of her artist's vision. Romney now reveals (through Aurora's retelling for the reader) the deeply buried romanticism underlying his marriage proposal of ten years ago. As a young boy, his imagination had been captured by "the tale / Of how a fairy bride from Italy / With smells of oleanders in her hair, / Was coming through the vines to touch his hand" (9.765-8). When the homesick Aurora finally came, "a poor sad snowdrop," he loved her all the same, patiently watching her grow into his 'bride of dreams" (797). Their reunion here in Aurora's mother's country, as Margaret Reynolds cogently explains, is hardly a failure to maintain feminist principles. After nine books of remarkable self-sufficiency, Aurora is freely choosing what will bring her greatest happiness and integrity (17).

Understandably, Browning's influence on other women went well beyond the realm of aesthetics. As Linda Lewis eloquently concludes,

Victorian women writers wasted little energy lamenting the shackles of patristic and poetic tradition. Instead they were creating their own icons for sainted womanliness, examining Scripture . . . finding their own voices as prophetesses for God, appropriating female figures (biblical, historical, and literary) and claiming their lives and words as paradigms for female spirituality, revising masculine-created myths . . . even recontextualizing the masculine Jesus . . . making him the tender feminine Sister as well as beloved masculine Brother. They looked to Elizabeth Barrett Browning as their example and liberator. (233-34)



Her example helped to legitimize this counter-tradition for those who participated in it, including Emily Dickinson, even though more powerful forces would partially succeed in consigning it to obscurity. As we shall see, it continues to spring up in some surprising places.

### The Grandmother in the Tower: George MacDonald's Portrait of the Invisible

Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

John 20:29

Seeing is not believing--it is only seeing.

George MacDonald, The Princess and the Goblin, Ch. XXII

I see thee better--in the Dark--  
I do not need a Light--  
The Love of Thee --a Prism be--  
Excelling Violet--

Dickinson, #611

George MacDonald (1824-1905) spent his life mining spiritual riches and fashioning them into a multitude of artifacts, some of which in turn have become hidden treasures awaiting the attention of anyone tracing the thread of feminist consciousness in Western culture. A Scottish clergyman, lecturer, and prolific writer of theological essays, poetry, and fiction, his chief claim to literary fame rests upon three fantasies ostensibly for children: At the Back of the North Wind (1871), The Princess and the Goblin (1872), and The Princess and Curdie (1883). Of these, The Princess and the Goblin is arguably the finest and the most relevant to the concerns of this study.

These three fantasies have never gone out of print, although many of MacDonald's writings became unavailable early in the twentieth century when his once-great popularity declined. More recently, MacDonald's works have somewhat ironically gained a following among evangelical Christians (in editions modifying the almost impenetrable Scots dialect of his adult novels), presumably because of his reverence for the Bible and unquestionably moral themes. But in The Princess and the Goblin, at least, MacDonald integrates Christian, classical, and Celtic elements to create an amazingly subversive work centering around a female divine figure who gradually guides a young girl and boy into maturity. Because it is also a compelling adventure story with its own unique representations of good and evil forces, many readers fail to see the complexity of its symbolism, even though they may recognize an occasional biblical allusion.

A brief biographical sketch will help to clarify MacDonald's contribution to the cultural traditions woven together by his fertile imagination. He was born December 10, 1824 (six years to the day before Emily Dickinson), to a hardworking clan of farmers and corn merchants in rural Aberdeenshire. His background thus has some resemblance to that of Robert Burns or D. H. Lawrence. Like Lawrence, he contrived to get a good education with the help of scholarships, yet remained strongly attached to his childhood roots. His family's strict Calvinist beliefs apparently caused him many of the same questions and fears as beset Dickinson, though on the whole he seems to have attained a more stable confidence in his personal resolution of spiritual conflicts. Along with Calvinist doctrine, he absorbed the Scottish countryside lore of brownies, hobgoblins, and supernatural

ladies--a congenial preparation for his extensive study of German Romanticism and folklore. He was also influenced by the English Romantic poets, particularly Blake, and for several years benefited from the financial patronage of Byron's widow.

Although MacDonald was ordained in the English Congregational Church, he held a pastorate for only three years. His conservative church members respected him but were discomfited by his unconventional views--ranging from the hope that all the heathen might ultimately be saved by a loving God to the opinion that clothes given to the poor should still be in decent condition. Suffering from symptoms of tuberculosis, he thereafter strove to support his wife and eleven children through writing, guest preaching, and lecturing. Despite his limited time for social life, one of his closest friends was Charles L. Dodgson, the author of Alice in Wonderland. The publication of Alice in 1865 has been seen as the turning of the tide away from didacticism in children's books and toward the freedom of the imagination (Avery 126). Although there are certainly didactic elements in MacDonald's tales, his particular gift was the ability to "make holiness vital, natural, and desirable" and to portray spiritual progress through the use of many-layered symbolism rather than through allegory (Avery 135). Resisting Victorian rationalism and the evangelical distrust of creative writing as false and therefore evil, he reclaimed the imagination as acceptable and even central to the spiritual life. In MacDonald's works the Celtic Christian respect for women and for the goodness of creation is revived, buttressed by the author's extensive knowledge of the Bible.

It is entirely possible that Emily Dickinson knew of George MacDonald's writings. The Princess and the Goblin was published in America as well as England in 1871, when the poet's niece Mattie would have been exactly the age to enjoy it with a child's understanding. The following year, MacDonald came to the United States and lectured in several East Coast cities, meeting numerous leading literary figures--and on three separate occasions staying in the home of Dickinson's friends Josiah and Elizabeth Holland (see Raeper 285 *passim*). Dr. Holland, a great admirer of MacDonald, was by that time the editor of Scribner's Monthly Magazine, where the Scottish writer's story Wilfrid Cumbermede had recently been serialized (Shaberman 42). Mrs. Holland might very naturally have mentioned their literary guest to Emily Dickinson, even though his name does not appear in the correspondence that has been preserved; Richard Sewall has pointed out that Dickinson's extant letters to Mrs. Holland never mention Charles Wadsworth or T. W. Higginson, nor even Samuel Bowles until near his death ( 574 ). If the Amherst poet in fact read anything by MacDonald, she would have found in his writings precisely the kind of reassurance her poems repeatedly long for and sometimes manage to express, from someone else equally familiar with the somber doctrines of predestination, election, and damnation. Even though there is no further evidence as to whether the two writers knew of each other, MacDonald's life and work serve to indicate that many of the fears, doubts, and struggles for peace of mind that preoccupied Dickinson are relatively normal for a sensitive person of their cultural heritage, rather than symptomatic of serious mental aberration. As MacDonald's biographer William Raeper

observes, "It is hard nowadays " for some readers "to feel the strain that these Calvinist beliefs inflicted on those who held them" (37).

In his best-known fantasies, MacDonald recombines traditional motifs of myths and fairy tales to convey his unique vision (Mendelsen 44)--a vision harmonizing Christian, Romantic, and startlingly feminist principles. In The Princess and the Goblin, the little Princess Irene unexpectedly discovers an old staircase leading to the tower rooms of her mysterious great-great-grandmother. About the same time, the princess and her nurse are lost on the mountain and are assisted by the young miner Curdie, whose courage and quick wits help him to deal with the troublesome goblins of the region.

Before long, Curdie is captured by the goblins while in the process of discovering their evil plans to kidnap the princess as a bride for the goblin prince. If this scheme fails, they intend to flood the mines, destroying as many miners as possible. However, Irene's grandmother has spun a magic thread for the child which she is instructed to follow whenever she feels it with her finger, until it leads her back to the grandmother's tower. By this means the young girl sets out one morning not knowing her destination, and eventually arrives at the cave where Curdie is imprisoned. She diligently removes the stones from the entrance until he is able to force his way out. Surprised and grateful, Curdie is utterly baffled by Irene's ability to find a route out of the underground passages by following a thread that he can neither see nor feel. Irene happily takes him to her grandmother's rooms, only to be distressed because Curdie cannot see the lady at all. Curdie is equally disturbed at her inexplicable behavior, but begins to reconsider the

matter when his mother reveals that she was once saved from the goblins by a magnificent light shining from that very tower of the king's house.

Curdie returns to the king's garden by night to watch for signs of the goblin invasion, but is wounded by the guard and confined to bed in a locked room by the time the goblin hordes arrive. In a dream he is anointed and healed by a beautiful lady, and awakens to find himself sufficiently restored to enter the fray and help defeat the goblins. However, they seem to have accomplished their goal, for Irene's room is found empty. But Curdie himself suddenly feels the magic thread and follows it to his mother's cottage where the princess has taken refuge. With some difficulty due to the flooding caused by the goblins' activities, Curdie's family take Princess Irene back to her home, where her father the king has arrived in dread of what has befallen her. Thus, Irene has saved Curdie, and Curdie has saved her and her household, all through the guidance of the strange grandmother.

In the sequel, The Princess and Curdie, the lady of the tower sends Curdie on a more extensive mission to save the king's health, household and capital city from widespread human corruption and greed. Much grimmer in tone and imagery, this satire of Victorian England suffers from its more allegorical structure, dwelling more on the horror of evil than on the nature of good. In the end, Curdie and Irene marry and reign happily, but they have no children, and the kingdom later reverts to corruption and ultimate self-destruction.

In The Princess and the Goblin, the symbolism remains more open-ended. However the grandmother's character is interpreted, she is clearly both model and guide. Presumably she has escaped Victorian and modern

religious censure by her surface resemblance to the fairy godmother of traditional tales such as "Cinderella." Katharine Briggs cites her as an example of the ancestral fairies who are attached to a particular family but whose appearance is more often a sign of imminent disaster than of good fortune (25). One scene fitting this interpretation occurs during a visit from Irene's father, when she confides in him about her encounters with the grandmother. The king seems more disturbed than surprised and increases measures to protect his daughter from the goblins, rather like any rural Scots father who sees his child manifesting the gift of "second sight," and consequently fears approaching misfortune.

Many critics have noted Freudian elements in the novel's structure. The Princess in her home halfway up the mountain may be seen as representing the ego, influenced by the superego in the form of the grandmother and threatened by the id in the shape of the goblins (Hein 34; Mendelsen 44). For this reading, it can be said that the novel is indeed a kind of coming-of-age story in which the two young protagonists learn to integrate the superego into their personalities and control the forces of the id. However, the Freudian interpretation vastly oversimplifies MacDonald's symbolism.

Various classical elements are also discernible in the tale. Like Diana, the grandmother is the Lady of the Moon. Like Minerva, she is skilled in spinning, fashioning her gift for the princess from spider webs. Like Isis, she is actively involved in human affairs and available to those in need, whereas the "king-papa," although benevolent, is always away and not immediately at hand for emergencies, rather like Osiris who rules the land of the dead. The

grandmother also shares the healing powers of Isis. The most relevant classical myth, however, is that of Demeter and Persephone, as Nancy-Lou Patterson demonstrates in a fascinating feminist reading.

First of all, Patterson notes that the sharing of the same name by the Princess and the grandmother echoes the traditional resemblance between Demeter and Persephone who personify the grain itself at different stages of maturity (169). Also, Irene's love for the array of wild and cultivated flowers in the mountainous garden recalls Persephone's delight in the flowers on the day she was abducted by Hades. The threat of capture by the goblin prince to be his bride in the underworld obviously echoes Persephone's fate as well (173). Irene does in fact experience an ordeal under the earth in order to rescue Curdie. When they come above ground, they are in the king's garden again, and Irene joyously seeks out her grandmother. The lady's magical fire with its cleansing flames of roses also recalls the scene when Demeter places the child Demophoon in the fire for beneficent purposes (Patterson 173).

All these elements indeed serve to enrich the novel's complexity and evoke positive female archetypes, but MacDonald's variations from the original myth are as significant as some of Shakespeare's departures from his sources. In a word, MacDonald stands the Demeter-Persephone story on its head. Whereas the goddess and her daughter had to submit to Zeus and Hades, the grandmother is clearly the power in charge of her fictional universe. Irene voluntarily descends to the underworld in obedience to her grandmother and saves her future husband from destruction by the forces of darkness--a completely different and far more feminist course of events from Persephone's unwilling abduction and Demeter's grief-stricken search.



Moreover, Irene's discovery of her friend instead of a frightening goblin prince in the underworld may well suggest that the awakening of sexuality can prove desirable rather than alarming. The eventual union of Irene and Curdie is foreshadowed from the beginning, when the little princess promises to kiss him in gratitude for helping her and her nurse find their way home from the mountain paths. The nurse indignantly prevents her, not realizing royalty of character is at least as important as royal birth. When Irene escapes to Curdie's cottage, his mother lays her to rest in Curdie's bed, where it is possible to see her grandmother's silver moon in the distance. On the way back to meet the king, Curdie has to carry the princess across the raging mountain streams several times. When they reach their destination, Irene asks her father if she may keep her word and give Curdie the long-promised kiss (not having taken the opportunity during their adventure in the goblin mines). To his credit, the king seems to see that Curdie is "not a miner only, but a prince as well" ( 179).

Emily Dickinson's references to goblins are quite as sinister as MacDonald's, often with sexual overtones, as in #512, in which the feminine "Soul"

. . . feels some ghastly Fright come up

And stop to look at her--

Salute her with long fingers--

Caress her freezing hair--

Sip, Goblin, from the very lips

The Lover--hovered--o'er--

In contrast, Dickinson's images of mines are often associated with literal or intangible wealth, as in #1117: "A Mine there is no Man would own / But must it be conferred." One poem having some affinities with Irene's journey to the underworld is # 611, " I see thee better in the Dark-- / I do not need a Light--." Because the "Miner's Lamp--sufficient be--To nullify the Mine--", the speaker has no "need of Day." Although it is Irene's thread, not Curdie's miner's lamp, that nullifies the threat of evil, the theme of both story and poem is that the light of love not only overcomes darkness but sometimes transforms it. Similarly, Dickinson's Poem #939 affirms, "What I see not, I better see-- / Through Faith," and Cecil Manlove points out that the grandmother in MacDonald's story is most often visible by night (158).

Another traditional image modified by MacDonald is the old woman spinning in an attic room. Whereas the Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on the spindle of an unknown (but possibly malignant) old woman, Princess Irene pricks her hand with an old brooch during the day, but visits her grandmother at night for healing. Feminist critics might also see the lady of the secret tower as another "madwoman in the attic"; of course Gilbert and Gubar discuss Dickinson as the culmination of this tradition (see "A Woman White: Emily Dickinson's Yarn of Pearl" 581-650). In "Publication--is the Auction / Of the mind of man" (#709), Dickinson's speaker would rather go "White--Unto the White Creator--" from her "Garret" than compromise her art. Dickinson uses the spinning motif in Poem # 1275 ("The Spider as an Artist-- / Has never been employed"). Also, in #605 the spider unwinds its "Yarn of Pearl" from its "Silver Ball," much like the one Irene receives from her grandmother.

Above all, Irene's mysterious grandmother is the feminine face of God, with more attributes and actions in common with the Christian God than with any pre-Christian goddess. She bears little resemblance to pagan priestesses, for she performs no rites, interprets no oracles, and never in any way implies that she is answerable to any still greater masculine being. She can manifest herself in many forms, but the ability to see her or her white pigeons or her lamp is dependent upon the spiritual vision of the beholder. Apparently omnipotent and omniscient, she does not seem to intervene directly in human events; if a reader wonders why she does not simply eradicate the goblins by magic, MacDonald offers no more answers than Job received upon asking similar questions.

From the very beginning, MacDonald weaves biblical and theological allusions into his portrayal of the grandmother and her relationships with others. When the little princess first loses her way among the corridors in the upper floors of the castle, the narrator comments, "It doesn't follow that she was lost, because she had lost herself, though" (6-7). Upon climbing the last mysterious staircase, the princess finds a landing surrounded by three doors. One is the spinning room, bare of anything but the spinning wheel and a chair, where the grandmother fashions the thread which will connect Irene to her thereafter; one is the lady's bedchamber, an earthly paradise with beautiful furnishings, the eternal lamp, and the fire of roses; and the third houses the lady's pigeons, whose eggs purportedly provide her daily nutriments.

Of course, white doves are traditionally associated with both the Holy Ghost and with Venus the goddess of love. The dove is also a symbol of

peace, and the name Irene, shared by the little princess and grandmother, literally means peace. On several occasions when the grandmother wishes to send a blessing or remind someone of her existence, a white pigeon comes fluttering down a ray of light from the glorious moon-lamp, strongly recalling artistic representations of the Annunciation or of Christ's baptism. This allusion is especially suggested when the dove's appearance frightened away the goblins who were harassing Curdie's mother one night shortly before he was born. As usual, MacDonald changes details just enough to prevent a simple allegorical identification of Curdie with the Christ-child; in fact the point of the memory is that the mother has reason to believe in the mysterious grandmother and thus advises her son to have patience with the little princess who insists she sees what he cannot see.

This brings us to one of the novel's most memorable scenes. As David Robb comments, "Curdie's inability to see Irene's grandmother when Irene leads him up to the attic is a master-stroke" (120). Whereas the princess sees her grandmother dressed in white in her beautiful bedchamber, the exasperated Curdie sees only a "big, bare, garret-room" containing "a tub, and a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple, and a ray of sunlight coming through a hole in the middle of the roof, and shining on your head" (158; ch. XXII). Collectively, these details suggest various images connected with the institutional church--perhaps a baptismal font, the Bethlehem manger, and the apple from the Garden of Eden, illuminated slightly by the light of the Spirit. All these matters lose significance, it is implied, if one cannot see the wondrous Being who makes the garret a place of beauty.

For the motherless princess, the nurturing figure of the grandmother is a suitable incarnation of divine love. In Chapter XV when Irene comes to the tower after wildly running out on the mountainside in fear of the goblins' long-legged cat, she hesitates to go to her grandmother's arms because she regrets her folly and because she dislikes to soil the lady's gown with her muddy clothes. But the grandmother affectionately embraces her and then cleanses her gown with one of the roses from her fire. The entire scene is strongly reminiscent of a famous passage from the Revelations of Divine Love, composed by the fourteenth century mystic Lady Julian of Norwich, in which Jesus is described as a mother embracing her child who has fallen in the mire of sin (195; ch. 61). Furthermore, Irene's request that the lady cleanse her frock "and my hands and my face," as well as her feet, probably alludes to the Gospel story in John 13 wherein Jesus washes his disciples' feet, and the impetuous Peter begs him to also wash his hands and his head. Neither Irene's nor Peter's request is granted, although for slightly different reasons.

Although the grandmother clearly stands for the Divine, Irene and Curdie both become increasingly Christlike themselves. In an episode recalling the Harrowing of Hell, the princess saves Curdie by means of her marvelous thread, the unbreakable tie to her grandmother. Significantly, Curdie originally found his way by a string of his own, anchored to his pickaxe, but the goblins had carried it off and led him astray, obliging him to acknowledge his need of help from some power beyond himself. Like the folktale sister, Irene is a courageous savior figure, but so is Curdie. Robb points out that his experience with the goblins and knowledge of the

underground labyrinths make him an equally necessary force contributing to the triumph of good over evil in the tale (121). The goblins cannot bear any kind of verse and thus detest Curdie for his exceptional skill at composing insulting rhymes to distract them or drive them away. Here MacDonald may be satirizing the Calvinist dislike of artistic creativity. After all, it was a Celtic Christian tradition, even into the nineteenth century, to recite encompassing prayers or charms to ward off evil. The gallantry of Curdie's singing and whistling also resembles that of Emily Dickinson's Poem #850, in which the speaker sings "To Keep the Dark away," as well as her Letter 261 to Higginson, "I had a terror since September--I could tell to none--and so I sing as the Boy does by the Burying Ground, because I am afraid."

When Curdie is captured by the king's men, several details of his ordeal are reminiscent of the last days of Christ. He is wounded, falsely accused and mocked by Lootie the nurse and some of the soldiers, but the captain of the guard, like the centurion at Christ's crucifixion, cannot help being impressed with him. Weakened from loss of blood, Curdie is shut in a room, ironically incarcerated by those he has come to save. He later realizes that his injuries were anointed by the lady whom he could not see when he had visited her tower. After he manages to help rout the goblins after all, he is appalled to find the princess gone from her room, where the disarray of her garments and bedcovers recall the graveclothes of Christ found in the empty tomb.

Thus MacDonald seems to advocate an androgynous ideal of heroism, as familiar religious images are associated first with one character, then with another. In fact, one of the problems with The Princess and Curdie is that Irene plays a much reduced role, resulting in a more conventional portrayal

of a masculine hero. On the other hand, the all-wise grandmother appears much more in the second volume and is even more clearly the God-figure, cleansing Curdie's character and sending him on his mission to the king's court in Gwyntystorm. There she reappears, unrecognized, in the form of a housemaid who is the only servant willing to assist Curdie in stamping out corruption. Even more literally than Christ, she takes the form of a servant and is despised and rejected of men. In the final apocalyptic battle, however, her hosts of white pigeons descend to hasten the defeat of the king's enemies. Afterwards a great feast is held at which she dresses once more as royalty and serves all the company with her own hands.

On the subject of divine humility, MacDonald further comments in a personal letter that "the things God says to you come in mostly at the back door, and what the others say, at the front" (qtd. in Raeper 349). Emily Dickinson would doubtless have appreciated the remark. One recalls her direction that her coffin be carried out from the back door, where she often preferred to welcome children and certain other visitors fortunate enough to see her in her later years.

Like the great-great grandmother, MacDonald's tales appear differently depending on the eye of the beholder. Yet the fact that the author was so well respected instead of labeled a heretic during his lifetime does suggest that patriarchal social structures are on the whole less powerful than many have supposed. Although The Princess and the Goblin could be passed off as a children's fairy tale, the children of evangelicals, then and now, would be the most familiar with the details of the Bible and therefore the most likely to perceive the symbolic dimension of MacDonald's

"deceptively simple" story (Raeper 326). What makes this tale so profoundly subversive is that the grandmother's gender is never defended, explained, or presented as a hindrance to finding, seeing, or believing in her. Her femaleness is simply taken for granted as a matter of course, not needing justification. Thus, MacDonald's young readers would not know that such female images of the divine were particularly unusual if no adult were at pains to tell them so. The same is true of Emily Dickinson; unless someone informs a child that the form and content of her poems are eccentric and unorthodox, they too simply become part of the landscape of the imagination.

Over the years, many articulate feminists have deplored the omnipresence of patriarchal attitudes and resulting injustices emanating from Western religion and literature, and with some reason. However, a remarkable number of well-known feminists have come from Jewish or Roman Catholic backgrounds, even though some may have rejected much of their heritage. They did not grow up re-reading The Princess and the Goblin until its pages came loose from the binding. Yet despite the dominance of patriarchal culture, the silent sister sits sewing coats for the day of her brothers' release, the grandmother sits spinning in her hidden tower, and Emily Dickinson sits in her upper room spinning her "Yarn of Pearl" (#605) into her "letter to the World" (#441).

### Conclusion

All the literary heroines just examined share many Christlike characteristics of the sister of "The Twelve Brothers." Although loving and forgiving, they are too courageously unconventional to fit stereotypical



definitions of passive female virtue. All are ultimately happily married, but each has other quests or goals in life as well. As a result, their transforming influence extends to other characters outside their family circles.

That sphere of influence has been gradually increasing over time, both reflecting and shaping the changing images of women within the surrounding culture. Jane Eyre's integrity primarily affects Rochester's character, although, as noted earlier, her own development owes much to the influence of other women. Also, her unselfish desire to share her inheritance with her cousins is motivated by the same concern for justice manifested by the folktale sister who refused to accept advantages that were denied to her brothers. In Adam Bede, Dinah explicitly seeks to follow Christ's example of service to humanity; she not only earns the affection of the Bede and Poyser families but also wins the confidence of the unhappy Hetty and even the respect of the misogynist schoolmaster Bartle Massey. Unfortunately the Methodist Conference does succeed in curtailing some of Dinah's potential influence, even as social structures impose limitations on Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch. However, Dorothea's unselfish concern for Rosamond and Lydgate--and for everyone in less fortunate circumstances than herself--also parallels that of the sister for her enchanted brothers.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh is especially significant because she successfully asserts a woman's right and capacity to become a

creative artist, reaching out to audiences beyond her immediate acquaintance. While affirming Aurora's personal quest, Browning also emphasizes the themes of voluntary self-sacrifice and service to others. Like the other writers discussed here, Browning claims the authority to redefine moral values within a traditional framework, instead of completely rejecting the framework. Her feminist vision does not deter her from creating a female antagonist in the person of the malicious Lady Waldemar. In contrast to the heroine, Lady Waldemar illustrates a negative approach to working within the system, just as the jealous mother of the young king in "The Twelve Brothers" is adept at manipulating her environment rather than reforming it. Thus, as if to anticipate the repeated accusations describing feminism as an inappropriately political perspective, both texts suggest that the social status quo in any era is quite as inherently political as any reform movement.

As for MacDonald's Princess Irene, she too is a courageous and independent-minded heroine. Irene learns to trust her own perceptions and to follow her grandmother's thread wherever it leads, setting Curdie free to apply his knowledge and experience to defeating the goblin hordes. Disbelieved by her nurse and even by Curdie at first, Irene strives for an attitude of patience and forgiveness, just as the sister of the twelve brothers forgives her husband's mistaken perception of her. The great-grandmother in the tower, as we have seen, is an amazingly matter-of-fact representation of

the divine in female form. Thus George MacDonald, a nineteenth-century male author, ordained in a venerable institution of patriarchal culture, made his subversive vision seem so natural and commonplace that "the stupendousness" of his "News" has escaped the notice of many who might welcome it (see Dickinson's Poem #1319, "How News must feel when travelling").

The "News" of the particular tradition of female heroism being traced in this study has grown, in the folklorists' terminology, through both diffusion and polygenesis. Emily Dickinson, like many others, was unquestionably enriched by reading most of the authors discussed in this chapter--as well as some less noted writers whose voices are largely forgotten. At the same time, she declared that the "only News" she knew consisted of "Bulletins from Immortality" (Poem #827), some of which she felt called to translate in her own "individual Voice" (Poem #719).

### Notes

1. As early as 1979, Jacqueline Berke pointed out that much popular fiction for young girls features self-sufficient child-heroines whose mothers are dead or absent and thus cannot serve as protectors or guides for their daughters. Susan Peck MacDonald has noted the tradition of the absent mother in Jane Austen's works and to some extent in other nineteenth-century novels.

## CHAPTER THREE

## DICKINSON AND HER AMERICAN CONTEMPORARIES:

## A SUMMIT AMONG MOUNTAINS

And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament;  
and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.

Daniel 12:3

Great men are rarely isolated mountain-peaks; they are the summits  
of ranges. The thought of a century seems to have been intrusted to very few  
minds, but those minds have always been fed by a myriad minds unseen.

T. W. Higginson, "A Plea For Culture"

Unto my Books--so good to turn--  
Far ends of tired Days--  
It half endears the Abstinence--  
And Pain--is missed--in Praise--

Dickinson, #604

Turning to the literature of nineteenth-century America, we find that  
the tradition of female heroism continues to provide evidence that Emily  
Dickinson was a relatively normal individual with much in common with  
other women of her era. As Dickinson's friend Thomas Wentworth  
Higginson maintains, the great minds who are best remembered by posterity  
"are rarely isolated mountain-peaks" but rather "the summits of ranges" ("A  
Plea for Culture" 18). The same argument has been brilliantly expanded by  
critic David Reynolds, who concludes that the great writers of the nineteenth

century "memorably reconstructed the popular subversive imagination" and that Emily Dickinson was the "highest product of a rebellious American sisterhood" (567; 413).

Many of these rebellious sisters were revisionists rather than radicals. Amid the social constraints and political inequalities they endured, they sought and found liberating principles within their cultural traditions. From reading Scripture and other literature, American women were increasingly empowered to challenge the very institutions that had taught them how and what to read. Among the writers who contributed to that challenge were Lucy Larcom, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, all of whom in their very different ways represented women's resistance to their society's definitions of gender roles and relationships. They also addressed the economic inequalities of the time, recognizing that gender is not the only factor underlying social injustice.

In the case of Lucy Larcom, it is not a fictional creation but the writer herself who contributes to the tradition of female heroism examined in this study--and to our greater understanding of Emily Dickinson. The character emerging from Larcom's autobiographical memoir, A New England Girlhood, possesses courage, integrity, an insatiable passion for learning, and a keen appreciation for the smallest beauties of her surroundings. Like Dickinson, she was ambivalent about her Calvinist heritage, resisting the impression

received from her elders that one "could not be entirely good, without being rather miserable" (70). Both young women found evidence against this somber philosophy through their own experience of nature, human relationships, and especially literature--including, paradoxically, the hymnal that influenced them from their earliest years. In light of Larcom's amazing range of intellectual activities during her years of labor in the Lowell textile mills, it becomes easier to see that Emily Dickinson could lead a rich and full existence, even though, according to Conrad Aiken's rather condescending assessment in 1924, her life might appear "perfectly devoid of outward event" by some standards (vii). "To care for poetry . . . does not make one a poet," Larcom observes, "but it does make one feel blessedly rich, and quite indifferent to many things which are usually looked upon as desirable possessions" (11). Like the sister of the twelve brothers, Larcom and Dickinson pursued their own priorities, whether or not their choices might be understood by others.

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's The Minister's Wooing, the heroine Mary Scudder even more vividly transforms--or redefines--her religious heritage. Unlike many of the Christlike women in literature, Mary is generally admired rather than criticized by her acquaintances for her exceptional character and behavior. Indeed, her willingness to sacrifice her love for James Marvyn (mistakenly believed to be lost at sea) for the sake of Dr.

Hopkins seems to be presented as her one instance of misplaced judgement. The unexpected return of James a few days before Mary's wedding, like the last-minute arrival of the folktale sister's twelve brothers, saves the heroine from paying too high a price for her unselfishness. Perhaps the marriage of Mary and James symbolizes the union of the more positive elements of the Puritan tradition with the good things of earthly life--precisely the resolution evidently sought by Lucy Larcom and Emily Dickinson, as well as many others within their tradition.

Whereas The Minister's Wooing moves back in time to explore the effects of Puritanism at the height of its influence, The Silent Partner, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, dramatizes the tension that nineteenth-century women might experience between maintaining intimate relationships with men and participating in more public efforts for the benefit of the larger society--much the same conflict presented in "The Twelve Brothers." Both the well-to-do Perley Kelso and the poverty-stricken Sip Garth feel it necessary to refuse marriage as they strive to alleviate the suffering of all the struggling employees at the Hayle and Kelso mills. It should be remembered that the Lowell mills described by Lucy Larcom were unusually progressive in their efforts to provide moderately decent working conditions. Perley encounters much opposition as she takes upon herself the responsibility of improving the physical environment of her employees as well as providing



sustenance for their minds and spirits. In a very real sense she is a sister-savior figure, especially for Sip Garth, who is enabled to become a street preacher by the novel's end, but Sip is also Perley's savior in that she awakens her social conscience and guides her to a worthwhile purpose for her energies and resources. Their relationship thus echoes that of Aurora and Marian in Browning's Aurora Leigh, a work greatly admired by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.

The further democratization of female heroism, so to speak, is the theme of Mary Wilkins Freeman's poignant short story, "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Whatever reasons there might be for some women to avoid marriage in order to fulfill themselves or benefit society, no feminist theory or movement is complete unless it addresses the need for justice within the married state. In Freeman's story, a rural New England wife and mother concludes that the time has come to insist that her husband provide the family with a more comfortable and spacious home--as he had promised long ago. When her husband Adoniram begins building a large barn instead, Sarah Penn remonstrates firmly but unsuccessfully, and eventually resorts to civil disobedience, enlisting her two children to help move all their possessions into the new barn. Consistent with her patient forbearance over the years, she carries out this revolt with a calm self-confidence that inspires her children's respect and overcomes Adoniram's obstinacy. As Suzanne

Juhasz so aptly says of Emily Dickinson, Sarah Penn accomplishes a "slant" revolution (175), wisely recognizing the same truth expressed by Dickinson in Poem #1129: "Success in circuit lies." Some might wonder why Mrs. Penn endures her difficult situation for so many years, just as they might wonder why the poet chose a life of seclusion and domestic responsibilities instead of pursuing a public career. Like the sister of the twelve brothers and the other heroines just described, Sarah Penn courageously follows her own mind and heart, no matter what onlookers might say.

Reading Emily Dickinson in the context of these other nineteenth-century women writers substantiates Higginson's reference to great minds as the summits among mountain ranges, or his other metaphor at the close of "Letter to a Young Contributor": "Literature is attar of roses, one distilled drop from a million blossoms" (91). Dickinson employed the same image to describe the poet's art in Poem #448:

This was a Poet--It is That

Distills amazing sense

From ordinary Meanings--

And Attar so immense

From the familiar species

That perished by the Door--

We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it--before--

Lucy Larcom's Testimony to the Power of the Imagination

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

John 8:32

It was the greatest of blessings to me, in the long days of toil to which I was shut in much earlier than most young girls are, that the poetry I held in my memory breathed its enchanted atmosphere through me and around me.

Lucy Larcom, A New England Girlhood

They shut me up in Prose--  
As when a little Girl  
They put me in the Closet--  
Because they liked me "still"--

Still! Could themself have peeped--  
And seen my Brain--go round--  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason--in the Pound--

Dickinson, #613

Although Lucy Larcom's autobiography, A New England Girlhood (1889), might be faulted by some readers for its nostalgic tone and apparent acceptance of difficult circumstances with minimal protest, it provides an invaluable firsthand record of the range of cultural materials available to a young New England woman during the first half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Larcom illustrates the possibility of coping with some of the

same spiritual problems addressed by Emily Dickinson and achieving a courageously optimistic attitude toward life on earth and in the hereafter--as does Mary Scudder of Stowe's The Minister's Wooing.

Considering that Larcom had to work for her living from the age of eleven onwards, her knowledge of oral and written literature is astounding. In any case English and American literature were not yet taught in institutions of higher learning, even had she attended them. As a child, Lucy delighted in her sister's almost inexhaustible fund of English, Scottish, and Irish fairy tales, and even "wild legends of Germany . . . not then made into the compact volumes known . . . as Grimm's Household Tales" (83). Although novels were somewhat frowned upon in Larcom's home, Sir Walter Scott's works were among the first to be permitted alongside Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Early absorption of the Bible and Watts's hymnal prepared the way for Lucy Larcom's voracious reading of Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Byron, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. The songs of Robert Burns were widely quoted. Even the Arabian Nights were available to Larcom, as they were to Harriet Beecher and Emily Dickinson. One begins to understand T. W. Higginson's contention that many people of the Northern states were culturally well in advance of their institutions of higher learning. "The home of real thought was outside, not inside the college walls," he wrote in 1870,

adding that this state of affairs was beginning to change ("Americanism in Literature" 61-62).

If Lucy Larcom, as a worker in the Lowell textile mills, had access to such a variety of materials, it becomes easier to believe that the more well-to-do Emily Dickinson could be highly informed about her culture--past and present--despite her gradually increasing physical seclusion. As Dickinson put it, "There is no frigate like a book / To take us lands away" (#1263). Larcom's knowledge of European folk tales through oral tradition is significant as well, as it strengthens the likelihood that Dickinson also might have been familiar with stories such as "The Twelve Brothers." In any case, as noted earlier in this study, Grimm's Household Tales did become available in print when Larcom and Dickinson were young adults.

Like Dickinson, Larcom objected to the frightening gloom too often associated with religious instruction. Larcom recalls being distressed as a small child when she was told she did not love God, for if she truly did, she would always be good (63). Much as she loved memorizing hymns, she disliked such lines as those describing the heavenly Jerusalem "Where congregations ne'er break up, / And Sabbaths have no end." She "did not want it to be Sabbath-day always" (71), for she was eager to run out amid the sun and winds and apple blossoms "into the freedom of the beach, the hillsides, the fields and gardens and orchards. In all this I felt as if I were

very wicked. I was afraid that I loved earth better than I did heaven" (72).

In much the same spirit, Dickinson's persona laments in #413 that she does not like Paradise

Because it's Sunday--all the time--

And Recess--never comes--

And Eden'll be so lonesome

Bright Wednesday afternoons--

Again, the object here is not to imply a chronologically impossible direct influence, but rather to illustrate Dickinson's common ground with others in her society.

Another experience shared by Larcom and Dickinson--and of course many other women--was that of remaining single in a culture where marriage and motherhood were seen as comprising women's primary sphere of influence. After leaving the mill to help with her sister's young family, Larcom obtained further education from Monticello Female Seminary in Illinois and subsequently supported herself by teaching, in addition to winning moderate acclaim as a poet. Her "Getting Along" and "Unwedded" are trenchant commentaries on the comparative merits of the married and single states. The former is a poignant monologue spoken by a wife who struggles to remind herself of her husband's virtues while ironically revealing his materialism and thoroughly unromantic detachment from her. This

speaker is a realistic example of "the wife forgotten" who inspires Emily Dickinson's compassion in her much-cited Letter 93, sent to Susan Gilbert before the latter's marriage to Austin. Perhaps in later years Dickinson remembered her realization that such women might well envy her maiden existence. As Larcom observes in "Unwedded," "many a mother, and many a wife, / Draws a lot more lonely, we all know well" (220). This poem, although it would seem autobiographical, presents a third-person view of a mature single woman who finds her happiness in faith, friendship, and unfailing service to others, ignoring gossip about her hypothetical romances and pity for her supposed loneliness. The portrait that emerges is akin to Dickinson's obituary, prepared by her sister-in-law Sue (see Leyda (2:472-74), or Bianchi's memoir mentioned earlier, in which she cited The Imitation of Christ as an important influence on her aunt. All three pieces may be somewhat idealized, but they indicate that Emily Dickinson in fact inspired her acquaintances to see her as the embodiment of some of their cultural ideals. What these controversial ideals were may become clearer through examining other neglected works by nineteenth-century women writers, in which the Christlike heroine is a surprisingly subversive figure.

### Harriet Beecher Stowe's Compassionate Critique of Puritanism

Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Luke 12:32

God will not let us have heaven here below, but only such glimpses and faint showings as parents sometimes give to children, when they show them beforehand the jewelry and pictures and stores of rare and curious treasures which they hold for the possession of their riper years.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Minister's Wooing, Ch. 37

The Love a Life can show Below  
Is but a filament, I know,  
Of that diviner thing  
That faints upon the face of Noon--  
And smites the Tinder in the Sun--  
And hinders Gabriel's wing--

Dickinson, #673

The Minister's Wooing (1859) is one of four New England regional novels generally regarded as Harriet Beecher Stowe's most memorable works other than the phenomenally successful Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852). It has received little critical attention, presumably being written off as a sentimental tale lacking that ill-defined element known as universality. Yet Stowe balances her themes celebrating romance and domesticity with a good admixture of comedy and satire, all expressed in a remarkably descriptive and leisurely style. Certainly The Minister's Wooing is no action-packed adventure story, and it might have benefited from some condensation, but it is a shrewd psychological study, a feast for the visual imagination, and a



compassionate critique of the New England Puritan tradition. Since The Minister's Wooing was originally serialized in the Atlantic Monthly, shortly before the peak of Dickinson's creative productivity, it is very likely that the poet read and enjoyed it.

Stowe blends Christianity, Romanticism, and feminism in her portrayal of the heroine Mary Scudder and several other admirable female characters. Like the sister of "The Twelve Brothers," Mary is courageous, unselfish, and unconventional, redefining the meaning of female virtue. She upholds yet transforms the rigorous Puritan belief system, establishing through her example the possibility of a new kingdom founded upon love rather than fear. Both Stowe's novel and Dickinson's poems illustrate the psychological suffering shared by many other sensitive spirits growing up in the Calvinist tradition. On the other hand, both writers celebrate love and nature and other joys of earthly existence as precious foretastes of the kingdom of heaven, rather than distractions from it.

Set in the late 1700s, The Minister's Wooing centers around Mary Scudder's love for the young sailor James Marvyn and her strength of character during his absence and after his reported death. Her widowed mother sympathizes with Mary's grief, but has never wanted her to marry James because of his religious skepticism. Mother and daughter keep house for the minister, Dr. Samuel Hopkins, a historical figure who earnestly

promoted the teachings of Jonathan Edwards. Although these rigorous doctrines confuse and distress several members of his congregation, the good-hearted Doctor does credit to his faith by denouncing the slave trade, thereby losing the richest supporter of his church. Mrs. Scudder is delighted as the minister slowly falls in love with her daughter, who resigns herself to her lover's death and agrees to marry the Doctor.

In the meantime Mary has made friends with a young French Catholic woman who had already married a pleasant older man but now has lost her heart to the unscrupulous Aaron Burr (another historical figure and--ironically--the grandson of Jonathan Edwards). Virginie de Frontignac brings out Mary's best characteristics, making the heroine more human and believable as the novel progresses. Upon realizing that Burr sees her as a mere plaything for his leisure hours, Virginie comes to stay with the Scudders while she tries to calm her emotional turmoil and remain a faithful wife. In a remarkably feminist scene, Mary firmly impresses upon Aaron Burr that he must cease all contact with Madame de Frontignac. In turn, when James unexpectedly proves to have survived shipwreck, Virginie strives to persuade Mary to follow her heart and explain her feelings to the Doctor rather than place herself in Virginie's predicament of loving one man while being married to another. Predictably, Mary believes she must not break her word and grieve the minister for the sake of her own happiness.

However, the village dressmaker (a superbly comic character) takes it on herself to tell Dr. Hopkins that Mary has always loved James, leaving the issue in his hands. After a painful night, the Doctor releases his bride-to-be to the young sailor. This generous sacrifice deeply impresses James, who has already become a more serious Christian during his long absence from Mary.

A superficial reader might classify Mary Scudder as a familiar stereotype of sentimental Victorian piety. However, Mary's inner conflicts over her love for James, her duty to her mother, and her genuine affection for Dr. Hopkins are realistically described, so that her character becomes more three-dimensional than that of Dinah Morris throughout most of Eliot's Adam Bede. Furthermore, Stowe carefully contrasts Mary's spiritual influence on others with the ministry of Dr. Hopkins so as to demonstrate that a woman can be as Christlike as any institutional male authority--a point perennially disputed by those opposed to the official ordination of women. Mary has inherited a meditative and prayerful disposition from her long-dead father, earning the sincere respect of her more practically-minded mother as she becomes a full church member at an unusually early age. Her character testifies to certain strengths in her religious tradition and yet undercuts it in that her holiness does not derive from the kind of formal theological study to which the Doctor devotes his life. Stowe even cites

Jonathan Edwards's deservedly famous description of his future wife, Sarah Pierrepont, as a historical example supporting the credibility of her heroine (265-66; ch. XVI).

Another model for Mary Scudder appears to have been the author's mother, Roxana Foote Beecher. Dying when Harriet was scarcely five, Roxana was remembered in the large family as a saint. However, Stowe's biographer Joan Hedrick implies that Roxana's life was in some respects at least as tragic as her early death. When the child Harriet visited her mother's relatives at Nutplains, she found a very different world from Lyman Beecher's strict regime, even though Beecher, like Dr. Hopkins, represented the New Calvinist teachings, discarding some of the harshest beliefs such as infant depravity. Grandmother Foote and Aunt Harriet were Episcopalians and sent the Beecher children presents at Christmas, a day not celebrated in their household. In her youth, the cultured and well-read Roxana had heard of distant lands and customs from her seafaring brother Samuel, and even learned French from a West Indian emigrant, but in her busy years as a minister's wife and mother of nine children she had very little time to read and reflect. Completely worn out, she died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-one (Hedrick 7). In The Minister's Wooing, Roxana's daughter has Virginie de Frontignac warning Mary what will happen if she sends James away and marries the minister: "[M]ust you struggle always, and grow

whiter and whiter, and fall away into heaven, like the moon this morning, and nobody know what is the matter? People will say you have the liver-complaint, or the consumption, or something. Nobody ever knows what we women die of' (Stowe 528). Here it seems likely that Stowe indirectly recalls the difficulties of her mother's life, worn down by the needs and demands of those who made her into the household saint. Although the author gives Dr. Hopkins truly admirable qualities, she from the beginning enlists the reader's sympathies on the side of James Marvyn, the cheerful adventurous sailor roughly reminiscent of her Uncle Samuel Foote (who, incidentally, prevailed upon Lyman Beecher to allow novel-reading in his home). Hedrick perceptively concludes,

Combining the prophetic intensity of her father with the literary and cultural heritage of her mother, Harriet Beecher Stowe fused the best of her paternal and maternal heritage. She transformed the role of the angel in the house from a purely self-denying (and ultimately fatal) script into one in which she was a facilitator of and minister to the spirits of others. (9)

The commendable tolerance of Mary and Virginie for one another's religious beliefs reflects this ability to synthesize different perspectives. Harriet Beecher grew up hearing not only her father's exhortations to seek the Calvinist high road to salvation, but also her maternal relatives' concern

for the soul of Lyman Beecher himself. The names of Mary and Virginie both recall the mother of Jesus, as if to suggest that they represent parts of one whole.

As Ann Douglas notes, Mary's spiritual sensitivity is combined with the "faculty" of making the lightest biscuits and creamiest butter in the village; she is her mother's daughter as well as her father's. Thus Stowe gently criticizes the absent-mindedness of Dr. Hopkins, who devotes himself to thought and study while the two women provide for all his material needs (Douglas 75). Mary also does her own spinning and weaving, as did Stowe's pre-industrial Nutplains relatives. She is thus much more economically productive than the stereotypical Victorian domestic angel. As Mary spins in her little garret overlooking an apple tree, one is tempted to see her as yet another "madwoman in the attic," a woman who mysteriously transforms the religious conventions she seems to follow so carefully into a spirituality so uniquely her own that Dr. Hopkins himself is humbled by her unswerving confidence in God's love. As for James, the seeds of his conversion are sown by his shamed realization that his love for Mary seems pathetically self-serving compared to her passionate willingness to give up her own salvation if only it could somehow ensure his entry into heaven.

Stowe is emphatically Romantic and painfully honest in portraying the struggles of Mary and Virginie to forget the men to whom they have lost their

hearts. Neither James's supposed death nor Aaron Burr's self-centeredness makes it any easier for either woman to control her deep love. Their situation recalls a cluster of traditional ballads in which a maiden hears that her beloved is lost at sea, marries another man, and subsequently is persuaded to desert him by the returning lover--or the devil who takes his shape--only to meet her death by shipwreck. A similar scenario is poignantly rendered in the literary ballad "Auld Robin Gray" by Lady Ann Lindsay (1750-1825). In this case the speaker marries "auld Rob" to help her poverty-stricken parents. When her supposedly dead lover unexpectedly returns, she feels it is her duty to remain loyal to her husband (as Mary Scudder would have done had James come home a week later):

I gang like a ghaist, and I carena to spin;  
 I daurna think on Jamie, for that wad be a sin,  
 But I'll do my best a gude wife ay to be,  
 For auld Robin Gray he is kind unto me. (153)

Stowe might easily have known Lady Lindsay's ballad, just as she knew the songs of Robert Burns. Still another obvious literary analogy, directly alluded to in the novel (306), is the story of Penelope staving off her suitors as she waits for Odysseus to come home, although in this case the couple are already married before Odysseus goes away. The common theme among all these narratives is the virtue of fidelity: under no circumstances should the

young woman marry anyone other than her lost beloved, for misery or disaster is sure to follow if she does. Everyone in Stowe's novel appears to agree with this traditional wisdom except for Mary herself and her protective mother.

Numerous Dickinson poems conveying the aftermath of tragic loss reflect this same principle of fidelity even when hope of earthly reunion is gone. In #618 the persona describes the terrible "Width of Life . . . without a thing to do" spreading before her and begs for simple tasks such as the "humblest Patchwork--Children do-- / To help its Vacant Hands--". After her bereavement, Mary's "care about the details of life seemed more than ever minute; she was always anticipating her mother in every direction, and striving by a thousand gentle preveniences to save her from fatigue and care" (377). When Madame de Frontignac takes refuge with the Scudders, she too devotes herself to helping with the domestic tasks and continues to adorn her appearance as she tries to subdue her feelings for Aaron Burr. Precisely the same attitude is expressed in Dickinson's haunting Poem #443, in which the speaker disciplines herself to meet her responsibilities and achieve external calm despite great suffering:

I tie my Hat--I crease my Shawl--

Life's little duties do--precisely--



As the very least

Were infinite--to me--

The imperceptible easing of pain, experienced by both Mary and Virginie, is paralleled by Dickinson's "It ceased to hurt me, though so slow / I could not feel the Anguish go" (#584), in which the speaker, "looking back" begins to sense that "whereas 'twas Wilderness-- / It's better--almost Peace--." At first Virginie is startled that Mary has agreed to marry the Doctor, clearly noting that it is "not the light of any earthly love" in her friend's face, "but only the calmness of a soul that knows itself no more" (430) However she sadly concludes Mary will "have peace" by this means (431).

The author directly undercuts Mary's mood of self-abnegation after James's shipwreck as "a state not purely healthy," in which her spirit is "utterly divided from the world" (376). Even though her behavior might seem the height of Christian selflessness, Stowe suggests that one must receive as well as give. When Madame de Frontignac asks to be regarded as Mary's sister during a lengthy visit, Mary's heart feels "a throb of more real human pleasure than for long months" (397).

The subplot is essential to Stowe's achievement in the novel, for Mary's character is perhaps most successfully dramatized by her passionate interview with Aaron Burr in behalf of her friend. The author's analysis of Burr resembles her father's view of Lord Byron as a tragic figure who went

astray and wasted his great gifts (Crozier 207). Burr is utterly astonished to hear the gentle Puritan maiden pronounce that he has "done a very great injury" to Madame de Frontignac and "taken the very life out of her."

Dismissing his cultivated protests, Mary continues,

You men can have everything--ambition, wealth, power; a thousand ways are open to you: women have nothing but their heart; and when that is gone, all is gone. . . . You have stolen all the love she had to give. . . . and you can never give her anything in return, without endangering her purity and her soul. . . . and if you die, as I fear you have lived, unreconciled to the God of your fathers, it will be in her heart to offer up her very soul for you, and to pray that God will impute all your sins to her, and give you heaven. (477-78)

Similarly in Emily Dickinson's "I cannot live with you," the speaker affirms,

And were You lost, I would be--

Though My Name

Rang loudest

On the Heavenly fame-- (#640)

Mary's indignation reveals a deeply feminist awareness that women's suffering is multiplied because society allows them to define themselves only in terms of their relationships, whereas men have many other ways to define

themselves and seek fulfillment. Paradoxically it is only in the arena of religious faith--despite the elements in Calvinism that Stowe deploras--that a woman such as Mary may be the equal or superior of any man, no matter what his learning or institutional office. At the same time, Stowe suggests that the impossibly high standards for salvation and full church membership, as promoted by Jonathan Edwards, are much to blame for inadvertently alienating the James Marvyns and Aaron Burrs of the world from Christianity.

The damage sometimes wrought by such disturbing doctrines as predestination is painfully evident in the scene at the Marvyn home when word comes that James is lost at sea. Mrs. Marvyn is a deeply sensitive and well-read woman who cannot help fearing she fails to meet the strict criteria for salvation set forth by Dr. Hopkins and her entire religious community. Worse yet, she fears for the souls of those she loves and thus is thrown into agonies lest James has been condemned for all eternity. (Mrs. Marvyn is commonly thought to be modeled on the author's sister Catherine, who suffered similar distress upon her fiance's death). Neither Mr. Marvyn nor Mary can halt the tide of the mother's near-insane despair: "The number of the elect is so small we can scarce count them for anything! Think what noble minds, what warm generous hearts, what splendid natures are wrecked and thrown away by thousands and tens of thousands!" she cries out in

honest rage (344). "It is not right! . . . I never can think it right,--never!" (346). It is Candace, the maternal African freedservant, who brings Mrs. Marvyn some measure of comfort as she gathers her in her arms and challenges the teachings of their church with her description of a compassionate Christ whose love cannot possibly be less than that of fallen human creatures.

Emily Dickinson parallels the reactions of Stowe's characters in such poems as #1601:

Of God we ask one favor,  
That we may be forgiven--  
For what, he is presumed to know--  
The Crime, from us, is hidden--

Similarly, in #1719 she describes a "jealous" Deity who "cannot bear to see / That we had rather not with Him / But with each other play." Repeatedly Dickinson's poems express torments lest the world to come be less precious than the beauty and relationships enjoyed on earth. Nevertheless, in other poems she finds her way to an image of Christ much like that of Stowe's Candace, as Dorothy Huff Oberhaus has explained in her perceptive essay "Tender Pioneer."

On the whole, The Minister's Wooing is not so much a forum for conventional piety as it is an effort to take seriously the emotional and

philosophical problems arising within the Puritan culture and dramatize them through the interaction of characters as lively as many in the novels of Dickens. Even if some readers cannot find Mary credible, Stowe lavishes vivid description and considerable wit upon her portraits of Mrs. Katy Scudder, Miss Prissy the dressmaker, Mary's friend Cerinthy Ann, Madame de Frontignac, and several minor characters from the community.

Because cultural attitudes toward nature have often paralleled those toward women and sexuality, it should be noted that Stowe and Dickinson are entirely at one in their imaginative appreciation of the New England countryside. Although the Puritans rejected the colorful celebrations of the Anglo-Catholic liturgical year, Stowe keeps reminding us of nature's rituals through repeated mention of morning birdsong, lilacs, apple blossoms, and apples--as well as the dressmaking and decorating rituals maintained by women in honor of great events in the natural life cycle. It is in character that Stowe enjoyed attending Episcopal services with her daughters in her later years. Emily Dickinson also seems to have measured time by the smallest details of the changing seasons. The robin is a favorite image with both writers; more than thirty Dickinson poems mention robins. A memorable example is "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune--" (#285), in which the images move through the signs that the speaker anticipates each season.

Both Stowe and Dickinson "see--New Englandly--" and re-create their vision for the delight of their readers.

Critic Gayle Kimball assumes Stowe concurred with the supposedly common Victorian belief that women had no sexual passions and were above the carnal temptations afflicting males (100-02). Yet Mary Scudder's saintliness is combined throughout the novel with her ineradicable Romantic yearning over the body and soul of her tall black-haired lover whom she never expects to meet again in this life. On the day James returns, she is meditating upon her approaching marriage, still unable in the privacy of her imagination to see anyone but James as the bridegroom:

She fell into one of those reveries which she thought she had forever forbidden to herself, and there rose before her mind the picture of a marriage-ceremony,--but the eyes of the bridegroom were dark, and his curls were clustering in raven ringlets, and her hand throbbed in his as it had never throbbed in any other.

(506)

In every respect, Stowe predisposes the reader to agree with Virginie's argument against keeping Mary's secret love from the Doctor: "My dear child, do you think, if he should ever find it out after your marriage, he would think you used him right?" (529). James similarly points out, "Is it a kindness to a good and noble man to give yourself to him only seemingly,

when the best and noblest part of your affections is gone wholly beyond your control?" (533). At the same time, we are meant to admire Mary's self-sacrificing concern for the Doctor's feelings and her deep joy over James's conversion. The latter circumstance literally transforms Mary's appearance during the last Sunday service before the wedding date, in a scene almost certainly intended to recall the Transfiguration of Christ: "Everybody noticed, as she came into church that morning, how beautiful Mary Scudder looked. It was no longer the beauty of the carved statue, the pale alabaster shrine, the sainted virgin, but a warm, bright, living light" (539). The author blends earthly and heavenly longings into one as Mary's exalted vision of eternity is founded on her now-certain hope of reunion with James:

And as Mary sang, she felt . . . that life is but a moment and love is immortal, and seemed, in a shadowy trance, to feel herself and him, far over on the shores of that other life, ascending with Christ, . . . all tears wiped away, and with full permission to love and be loved forever. (540-41)

Emily Dickinson's Poem # 625 more succinctly reproduces such a vision:

'Twas a long Parting--but the time  
For Interview--had Come--  
Before the Judgment Seat of God--  
The last--and second time

These Fleshless Lovers met--  
 A Heaven in a Gaze--  
 A Heaven of Heavens--the Privilege  
 Of one another's Eyes--  
 .....  
 Was Bridal--e'er like This?

With gentle irony, Stowe proceeds to bring about the happy ending, not through the heroine's much-extolled virtues, but through Miss Prissy's kindhearted revelation to the Doctor, encouraged by Madame de Frontignac and old Candace, who has been devoted to James from his mischievous childhood on. In their diverse ways, these women are Christlike in their loving concern for Mary and James, perhaps representing the active side of faith as Mary represents the contemplative side.

As with the sister of the twelve brothers, Mary's marriage serves as her reward, the fulfillment of personal desires. However, her selfless consideration for the Doctor, her concern for Virginie de Frontignac, and her daily kindnesses to others--including her assistance in the Doctor's ministries to the poor--are all freely chosen in the same spirit as the sister's voluntary search and sacrifice in behalf of her brothers. Like the sister, Mary survives to enjoy her marriage instead of dying like Little Eva and other sentimental heroines of popular culture. She indeed illustrates Hedrick's assessment of



Stowe, already cited, as an author who transforms the image of the angel in the house while continuing to affirm domestic accomplishments and family ties.

According to Kimball, Stowe must be recognized as an influential voice who "did much to shackle women to domesticity and the avoidance of competition with men," hindering the "achievement of equal rights for women" (168). It is true in essays such as "Woman's Sphere" that she, like many others of her day, expressed the belief that the majority of women would continue to seek and find their greatest happiness in marriage and motherhood, and that she exalts the good mother as the ultimate source of all efforts to transform the evils of society (Household Papers 249-73). But Kimball's conclusion must be questioned in light of The Minister's Wooing, for here Stowe, whether consciously or not, subverts the cult of motherhood to a surprising extent: both Mary and James are explicitly described as having independent personalities that continually surprise their mothers. Neither Mrs. Scudder nor Mrs. Marvyn could be labeled a bad mother, but neither is presented as primarily responsible for molding her child into the kind of young adult each has become; the same might reasonably be said of Emily Dickinson's mother. Each mother does the best she can according to her lights, but both are far more human and realistic than the stereotypical ideal which Stowe might elsewhere seem to endorse. If anything, the affection

between Mary and her mother seems rather like the relationship between Emily and Lavinia Dickinson, marked by mutual respect for their different temperaments; such sisterly friendships are often seen between single mothers and only daughters to this day.

In reality, the nineteenth century saw increasing tension between the improvement of educational opportunities for women and the economic pressures of industrialization to keep home and hearth separate from the world of commerce. As Hedrick puts it, "When women's informal ministry was enshrined in Victorian parlors swathed in tapestries and filled with worldly goods, its radical challenge to male structures of power was sharply curtailed" (287). One consequence of these tensions was the compromising view that women--perhaps exceptional women--could indeed do and be most of the same things as men, but that they could not raise a family of children at the same time. In theory this view is sorely outdated; in practice the dilemma it recognizes is far from being solved. In the meantime, many talented women have felt obliged to make choices not faced by men; Kimball notes that 60 to 70 percent of the first generation of graduates from women's colleges did not marry (161). One begins to wonder who actually lived according to the stereotype of the cultured Victorian mother who devoted herself primarily to husband and children. Harriet Beecher Stowe was fortunate enough to have household help in order to obtain some time to

write, but as she explains in The Minister's Wooing (489) and in a perceptive essay titled "The Lady Who Does Her Own Work" (Household Papers 85-101), a great many refined and educated American women, outside of the South, had to spend considerable time doing household work that would be done by servants in comparable English homes. Children were commonly expected to help, rather than receive undivided attention from their mothers. In this context, Emily Dickinson's lifestyle seems quite explicable and rational.

It is true that the Dickinsons had an Irish maid and gardeners for many years, but they fit Stowe's description of American hired help who literally helped the family members with the work as opposed to doing all of it for them. It must be reiterated that the poet contributed long hours of active labor to the maintenance of a leading citizen's large home; Aife Murray argues that the ebb and flow of Dickinson's writing corresponds with the absence and presence of a maid (although there probably are other factors as well). After the creativity of the early 1860s, the poet wrote less from 1865 until 1869, when Maggie Maher was hired (286). Dickinson then returned to making fascicles of her poems, but she also worked side by side with Maggie and her sister as long as her health permitted (288). As it was, Dickinson had enough to distract her from perfecting her art. It is not surprising that she, like many other intellectual women of the era, did not undertake the additional responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.

The Minister's Wooing enables readers to better understand the heritage underlying Emily Dickinson's art and life. If she ever experienced a romantic crisis in which she suffered a separation from her beloved, as many have speculated, Stowe's novel makes it the more credible that she refused to settle for second best (the bereaved Catherine Beecher also remained single). If, as others infer, the poet personally suffered the religious doubts and fears expressed in her poetry, The Minister's Wooing lays bare the theological system evoking such reactions and, once again, makes the poet's responses seem more natural than neurotic. Perhaps it is within reason to see some affinities between the impact of Mary Scudder on other characters and the impressions of Emily Dickinson recorded by those who knew her. In addition to the previously mentioned tributes from her sister-in-law and niece, an article by her first cousin Clara Newman Turner recalls the poet as angelic, sensitive, extraordinarily moved by the beauties of nature, and sympathetically available to the orphaned Clara and her sister Anna, who were placed in Austin's family to help care for Ned and Mattie (see Sewall 264-75). In these accounts we catch glimpses of a courageous spirit continually seeking a balance between the affection she expressed for virtually all her relatives and friends and her need for solitary hours to refine her poetic gifts for others she would never meet.

A Message of Deliverance: The Silent Partner

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.

Luke 4:18

If I get away from my loom, I shall come back to my loom. . . .It's too late. What am I fit for? Nothing. I'm used to the noise and the running about. I'm used to the dirt and the roughness. . . I knew I should come back. My father and mother came back before me. It's in the blood.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Silent Partner, Chapter 9

A Prison gets to be a friend--  
 Between its Ponderous face  
 And Ours--a Kinsmanship express--  
 .....  
 The narrow Round--the Stint--  
 The slow exchange of Hope--  
 For something passiver--Content  
 Too steep for looking up--

Dickinson, #652

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) is one of those prolific and popular women writers whose works were neglected during much of the twentieth century. Although some of her novels may seem overly didactic to modern readers, The Silent Partner (1870) and The Story of Avis (1877) are now receiving some critical attention for their considerable artistic merits as well as their profoundly sobering themes. Phelps clearly articulates the painful conflicts many women experience between maintaining intimate relationships with men and participating in more public activities for the

good of the larger society. The issues she raises are at least as old as the folktale of "The Twelve Brothers" and have by no means been resolved by more recent feminist reforms. It is The Silent Partner that directly contributes to the tradition of Christlike heroines akin to the sister of the twelve brothers, even recreating the metaphor of female silence and reaffirming the importance of courageous nonconformity.

In this novel Phelps employs a curiously objective and detached style, distancing the reader from the wealthy protagonist, Miss Perley Kelso, whereas in The Story of Avis she conveys the thoughts and feelings of individual characters in more passionate and subjective language. Perley is thoroughly satirized during the first few chapters for her self-centered materialism and sheer laziness, but Phelps makes clear that Miss Kelso's faults are encouraged by the males in charge of society. Flourishing industry has succeeded in compartmentalizing domestic and economic spheres so as to obscure the image of the lady who does her own work. When Perley's father suddenly dies, her fiance Maverick Hayle and his father are incredulous, amused, and irritated by turns to find that the young woman wants to replace her father as an active partner in the business. Perley's chance encounters with Sip Garth, one of the struggling textile mill workers employed by Hayle & Kelso, have opened her eyes to the chasm between her

pampered existence and the degrading poverty of the laborers on whom all her comforts ultimately depend.

To convey the realities of that poverty, Phelps occasionally includes long passages in the second person--most powerfully in Chapter IV, "The Stone House"--which present the larger environment surrounding the main characters much as the interchapters do in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath or Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country. The author's descriptions of the appalling conditions in the factories and tenements convey the same outrage as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" and of course Aurora Leigh, a work that left a profound impression on the young Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Phelps's use of irony, however, is more reminiscent of George Eliot than of Browning. From the powerful second-person passages, Phelps moves deftly into the scraps of conversation exchanged as the mill lets out in the evening, finally focusing in once more on Sip Garth, an intelligent and grimly fatalistic young woman who struggles to support herself and her deaf-mute sister Catty.

Catty's silence is a well-chosen metaphor for the various limitations suffered by rich and poor women alike in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the real world that is the reverse of the imagined setting of "The Twelve Brothers," silence is figuratively if not literally imposed upon women, but The Silent Partner recognizes that upper-class women

nonetheless have some advantages denied both sexes among the laboring class. Thus Perley Kelso does have some opportunity to voluntarily devote her time and energies for others in the same spirit as the folktale sister.

Imagery and symbolism are woven throughout the fabric of the novel; a particularly effective example is the elaborately described little chess table representing the mental "game of chess" between Perley and the men who checkmate her hopes of active partnership. In another compelling scene, Sip returns home to her damp little rooms, surprised to find that Perley has come to see her, made a fire, and lighted the lamp. It is the beginning of Miss Kelso's dedication to bringing more light to all the workers for whom she has come to feel an inescapable responsibility. The details of the storm in which Perley and Sip first meet, the light of the yellow leaves in which Stephen Garrick speaks his love to Perley, even the repeated references to such small things as Nynie Mell's blue ribbons contribute memorably to the novel's impact.

Perley Kelso candidly acknowledges her own ignorance of business management and of the millhands' lives, but she is determined to learn more about both insofar as she is permitted. This sense of humility helps save her character from irritating self-righteousness; she patiently accepts Sip's changing moods and gradually gains her trust. As they grow more intimate, Sip becomes her employer's staunch defender, a kind of mediator between her



people and the unconventional young lady who can never return to her former complacency. "We are not cruel, we are only asleep," Perley sadly realizes. "Who knows what to think that has just waked up?" (128).

Through her firsthand experiences among the workers, Perley awakens to many levels of their needs. On the terrible evening when Sip brings Catty home from the doctor with the knowledge that her already afflicted sister is now going blind, Perley is waiting in their rooms with a warm supper. Only Catty is able to eat, while Sip for once loses her control and allows herself to cry a long time in Perley's arms. Miss Kelso, however, does not limit herself to sympathy and practical benefits. To the astonishment of her fashionable acquaintances, she proceeds to set up a library for the mill workers and begins holding Friday evening gatherings for them in her home, for reading aloud, playing music, and other cultural pursuits that nourish their starving spirits. Because she has treated them like human beings and friends, it is only Perley who can break up the threat of a violent strike when the firm is forced to lower wages temporarily.

It is after this last incident that Phelps most painfully explores the conflict so many women have experienced between the desirable elements of marriage and motherhood and a sense of personal vocation involving other demanding activities. Critic Lori Duin Kelly observes that the author sometimes "displayed a callous indifference to men" (119), often

simplistically stereotyping men and women (121). However, Carol Farley Kessler maintains that the novels indicate that Phelps was "not against marriage in itself" but rather against the ways it has been "designed to benefit men to the detriment of women" (91). Phelps examines not one issue but several: the question of marrying at all, the question of marrying the wrong man, and the question of motherhood--a predictable consequence of marriage in the nineteenth century.

In The Silent Partner, Perley rejects two opportunities to marry, and Sip refuses a proposal as well. The reader is led to sympathize entirely with Perley's rejection of Maverick Hayle, who completely fails to understand her desire for autonomy and her concern for the factory laborers. On the other hand, the author creates an extremely positive portrait of Stephen Garrick, born of the working class but through determined effort risen to the position of third partner in the Hayle and Kelso business. His fierce desire to help others out of the mud of poverty whence he came has drawn him toward Perley for some time. On the day of the potential strike, he is impressed by her courage and cannot refrain from telling her of his love. He thinks of her as a priestess: "The woman's life had become a service in a temple, and he had lighted the candles for it" (256) But Perley calmly points out that marriage in itself is a profession for women, and she cannot spare the time for it. She could fill ten lives with the work in which she is already engaged.

Yet, if she had been able to love anyone, this might have been the man. The deserving Garrick, sadly, cannot find all his needs fulfilled by his dedication to social reform. Perhaps it is intentional that he shares the name of the first Christian martyr, for his happiness is sacrificed for the sake of Perley's ministries.

As for Sip Garth, she fears having children who would suffer the same harsh life she has endured. Unlike Perley, she sincerely loves the man she rejects, the young watchman Dirk. Having recently lost her sister Catty in a disastrous flood, the lonely Sip grieves over her hard decision. The world "seemed emptied, swept, and garnished. She felt as if her life had just been through a 'house-cleaning.' It was clean and washed, and proper and right, and as it should be, and drearily in order forever" (290). Emily Dickinson uses a similar metaphor of "Sweeping up the Heart" in "The Bustle in a House / The Morning after Death" (#1078). Sending Dirk away is as painful as bereavement for Sip; she feels circumstances require her to give up that kind of love forever. "I don't see why I couldn't have had that, leastways," she mourns. "But she did see," the narrator darkly concludes (290).

Sip's motive for remaining single suggests to the reader an unspoken reason for Perley's choice as well. Garrick himself might support Perley's reform activities, but if she had children, even a woman of her social class would find it difficult in nineteenth-century America to devote so much time

to matters outside the home. Phelps praises her own mother's devotion to her children despite her other work (Chapters From a Life 13-15), but the elder Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was a writer of children's books, an activity somewhat more easily combined with family responsibilities than Perley's work with the factory laborers.

By remaining single, Perley and Sip can retain more control over their lives than any married woman might have. As Kelly observes, the two heroines are remarkably successful in rebelling against traditional expectations and taking on roles often held by men. Sip becomes an eloquent street preacher, pouring out upon her community all the compassion and comfort she formerly had given Catty. "For love's sake" had been her private message in sign language to reassure her sister's fears or enforce a necessary command. Now "for love's sake" Sip finds a public voice to tell her people that the message of Christ is "the only poor folks' religion in all the world" (296). Although she well understands their cynicism about the religion that seems but one more possession of the rich, the novel has demonstrated how the intervention of a single rich woman has made a great difference to all the laborers of Five Falls, above all to Sip herself. Like Christ, Perley Kelso has freely taken it upon herself to come down among the poor and suffering, bringing the possibility of a better life. Like the sister of the twelve brothers,

she no longer wants a comfortable life at the expense of her less fortunate brothers and sisters.

On the surface it may seem that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Emily Dickinson are utterly different in terms of aesthetic theory, technique, and themes. In 1872, Dickinson wrote to Louise Norcross about a "Miss P" who had requested that she "aid the world by my chirrup more. . . . I replied declining. She did not write to me again--she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch. . ." (L#500).

Whether or not this "Miss P" refers to Phelps, as Johnson suggests in his note to the letter, Dickinson's phrasing here does imply a disinclination to become directly involved in the kind of social reforms with which Phelps was deeply concerned. Nevertheless, St. Armand has explored many similarities between the two writers. Both had a strict New England upbringing, both had stern domineering fathers, both were deeply influenced by Browning's Aurora Leigh, and both were much occupied with imagining an afterlife in which those separated on earth might be reunited (118-24). St. Armand also notes that the Atlantic Monthly had published several anonymous stories by Phelps, and that her phenomenally popular novel The Gates Ajar was available through Amherst's Circulating Library by 1871 (332).

Although it is difficult to be sure whether Dickinson ever read Phelps, it seems fair to say that several of her poems in fact express the sorrow of one

like Perley who wants to help or heal others, as well as the more poignant sorrow of someone like Sip Garth who feels compelled to renounce a beloved.

In #132, for example, the speaker begins,

I bring an unaccustomed wine

To lips long parching,

Next to mine,

And summon them to drink;

Crackling with fever, they Essay,

I turn my brimming eyes away,

And come next hour to look.

Upon finding the sufferer's pain is over, the speaker is concerned for the "other thirsty there may be" to whom this one might have directed her,

And so I always bear the cup

If, haply, mine may be the drop

Some pilgrim thirst to slake--

If haply, any say to me,

"Unto the little, unto me,"

When I at last awake.

Desiring to be ready at all times to serve someone in need, the speaker is recalling Christ's parable of the Last Judgment when the righteous are told that whatever they have done for "one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me" (Matt. 25:40). The pain of those around her seems to awaken her to the parable's message, just as Perley Kelso begins to take organized religion more seriously after Sip has attracted her curiosity and compassion. As in the poem, the death of Catty serves to make both Perley and Sip the more determined to alleviate the suffering of others.

Dickinson uses a similar metaphor more pessimistically in #690:

"Victory comes late-- / And is held low to freezing lips --/ Too rapt with frost/ To take it--." Recalling Christ's saying that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father's knowledge (Matt. 10:29), the speaker cries out, "God keep His Oath to Sparrows--Who of little Love--know how to starve--." In The Silent Partner, Perley's intervention is too late and too little to avert such tragedies as the death of the child Bub Mell, caught in the factory machinery. Thus, both writers convey the theme that one must do what one can to reduce the suffering of the world, but it will never be enough.

Sip Garth's inability to learn new skills that might enable her to obtain some better employment is one of the more painful elements of the novel. Even though Perley finds several opportunities for her, Sip makes too many mistakes wherever she goes, and at last comes back to the mill saying that

she knew it was too late (at twenty-three), that factory working is in her blood and she can never escape from it. Dickinson's "A Prison gets to be a friend" captures the mood of many like Sip who become so familiar with the "narrow Round" of hardship and discomfort that all else is "like a Dream--" (#652). However, Sip does ultimately become a street preacher, proclaiming messages of faith and hope to others.

Clearly, although Dickinson was no social activist, she cared deeply about human suffering and gave it memorable expression. Conversely, Phelps was able to recognize the importance of nourishing minds and hearts as well as bodies. In The Silent Partner this theme is poignantly illustrated by Perley's cultural gatherings on Friday evenings where the mill hands come to hear Beethoven, to read Hugo, and to study philosophy. Sip finds a mysterious comfort in a remarkable painting of Beethoven dreaming of a shadowy orchestra; her sister Catty also hears only in dreams. Thus, Phelps suggests that the object of social reform should not be to help the mill workers live the kind of idle, materialistic life Perley led at the beginning of the novel, but rather to create an environment where they may drink the "unaccustomed wine" of the painters and seers and poets like Emily Dickinson.



Grassroots Feminism: "The Revolt of 'Mother'"

Charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things,  
endureth all things.

I Cor. 13:14

Nobility of character manifests itself at loopholes when it is not  
provided with large doors.

Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The Revolt of 'Mother'"

Soil of Flint, if steady tilled--  
Will refund the Hand--  
Seed of Palm, by Lybian Sun  
Fructified in Sand--

Dickinson, #681

The stories of the New England regionalists Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, are attracting increasing attention from feminist readers. As Barbara Solomon observes,

Strange as it may at first seem, their reticent heroines, dressed in sprigged muslin and carrying silk shawls, were women who valued their identity and who contributed meaningful work, women who had not yet been relieved of household chores to become the leisured but despised "just a housewife" of the decades to come. (2)

Both writers are notable for their portrayals of middle-aged and elderly female protagonists. In Freeman's short story "The Revolt of 'Mother,'"

first published in 1891, Sarah Penn represents the struggle of wives to receive justice within the married state. As a long-married wife and mother, Mrs. Penn is unusual among the heroines surveyed in this study. She wins our admiration by a remarkable display of courage and resourcefulness. Sarah Penn illustrates grassroots feminism developing from the firsthand experience of injustice--not from the disruptive influence of irrational radicals, as anti-feminists tend to argue.

Plot, character, and setting combine to make "The Revolt of 'Mother'" an extremely focused and unified work. The story opens with Sarah Penn's dismay that her husband Adoniram has begun building a new barn in the very spot where he had promised to build her a house forty years ago. To his wife's reproachful questions, Adoniram replies nothing, for he does not have to. Even the Homemakers for Equal Rights Amendment movement of the twentieth century has failed to change the fact that no laws compel a husband to provide for his family's needs, unless the couple become formally separated. Accepting temporary defeat, Sarah ceases protesting for a few weeks. As Solomon notes, she "continues to bake her husband's favorite pies, to sew new shirts for him, and to process the milk of their six cows. Family solidarity is sacred, and Mrs. Penn's actions are no threat to it" (34). This comment is something of an understatement, for Sarah goes out of

her way to uphold the solidarity of the marriage. Instead of becoming depressed and inefficient, she seems to channel her emotional energies into fashioning superb pastry and keeping a scrupulously clean and orderly home.

Sarah Penn is partly motivated by concern for her daughter Nanny, who will soon be married. Sarah and Adoniram are somewhat old considering the ages of their children, for Nanny seems perhaps nineteen or twenty, and Sammy about fourteen. This situation is clarified when the mother mentions having lost two other children. It is natural that she worries about Nanny's delicate health. She wants Nanny and George to live with them so that she can continue sparing her daughter the harder chores (although one would assume that even more work would result from the presence of another man and eventually children in the home). Nanny will be obliged to move elsewhere unless a larger house is built, yet Adoniram is determined to have the fine new barn instead.

Sarah shows nobility of character as she makes the best of a difficult situation. When Nanny complains about the new barn, the mother ironically says, "One of these days you'll find out . . . that we ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do any more than we do of the weather" (420). However, as Joseph

McElrath points out, she does not seek revenge by turning Nanny against Adoniram (135). Instead, she reminds Nanny of her father's good points, such as keeping the roof repaired, and not making his daughter go to work for her living.

Sarah's loyalty to her husband is further illustrated in that she selects a time when both children are out of the house to resume her remonstrations, pleading her cause "like a Webster" (424). Adoniram stubbornly refuses to justify himself or even discuss the issue, but his wife does not give up easily. Before the new barn has been put to use, Adoniram goes on a few days' journey to buy a new horse. To Sarah, his departure is the work of Providence, for the opportunity to act has come through no design of hers. In a single day she and her children move all the contents of the small house into the new barn. As Sarah Penn leads Nanny and Sammy in the path of nonviolent resistance, Freeman compares her courage to that of General Wolfe scaling the Heights of Abraham to take the city of Quebec by surprise. (This heroic endeavor also attracted the notice of Emily Dickinson, as evidenced by Poem #678.) The allusion may encourage readers to see a parallel between the names Adoniram and Sarah and the names of Abraham and Sarah, ancestors of the Israelite nation. Like the biblical Sarah, Mrs. Penn becomes blessed with the fulfillment of a dream in her later years,

but in Freeman's story the heroine's own strength of character is the chief cause of this happy conclusion.

Sarah Penn's faith in her unconventional course of action refuses to be shaken by the opinions of others, even though some of her neighbors hold her "to be insane; some, of a lawless and rebellious spirit" (429). Very likely such an event would have appealed to Emily Dickinson's sense of humor; the poet's own nonconformity has of course attracted similar suppositions. Before long the minister arrives to make a comically fruitless attempt to remonstrate with Mrs. Penn. She replies firmly:

I've made it the subject of prayer, an' it's betwixt me an' the  
 Lord an' Adoniram. . . . I think it's right jest as much as I  
 think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the  
 old country. . . . I've got my own mind an' my own feet, an'  
 I'm going to think my own thoughts an' go my own ways, an'  
 nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a  
 mind to have him. (430).

In the face of this serene self-confidence, the minister is forced to retreat from the field and let events work out as they will.

As many activists forget too easily, the transformation of single individuals is essential to the permanence of any social reform. In this

case, one character who changes significantly is the boy Sammy. At first he appears as unconcerned as his father about Mrs. Penn's attitude toward the new barn, but his respect for his mother clearly soars by the end of the story. He helps move all the household goods without objection, and when Adoniram finally returns home, he suddenly steps in front of his mother as if half expecting a violent outburst. But old Adoniram is too stunned to be angry. Sarah escorts him in and quietly reaffirms her right to do her duty by him in more suitable conditions: "You've got to put in some windows and partitions; an' you'll have to buy some furniture" (431). Meanwhile Sammy supports his mother by taking the new horse around to the old barn. It is implied that one consequence of Sarah Penn's courage is that her son will not repeat his father's mistakes in life.

The final scene of Freeman's story has a certain affinity with the resolution of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, with the difference that Sarah Penn is her own Paulina. Like King Leontes, Adoniram finally repents of his behavior to his wife. Faced with an accomplished revolution, the old man eats his excellent dinner in silence and then goes out to sit on the step. When Sarah joins him, she finds him weeping. "Why, don't do so, father," she says.

He replies brokenly, "I'll--put up the--partitions--an' everything you--want, mother....I hadn't no idea you was so set on't as all this comes to" (432).

What are we to make of Adoniram? Why did he never keep his promise to build a house, even though he could afford it? One is reminded of the Amish concession to technology, bringing electrical power into their barns, but not their homes. A country saying describes men like Adoniram: "He doesn't farm to live; he lives to farm." In the end we are evidently to accept Adoniram's reactions as expressing profound surprise. He has mended the roof, moved the stove to the shed in summer, worked hard all his life, and simply never realized how little he has considered Sarah's comfort and convenience, whereas she has carefully attended to his. For the first time the old man feels ashamed. Like the twelve brothers--or the prodigal son--he comes to himself, regaining his true humanity.

As in The Winter's Tale, the story ends with a subtle blend of tears and laughter. Certainly there is a comic element in Mrs. Penn's imaginative revolt, but it seems inappropriate to classify "The Revolt of 'Mother'" as primarily a comic fantasy (see, for example, Perry Westbrook 64-65). It must be granted that in 1917 Mary Wilkins Freeman claimed she had sacrificed truth in this story, remarking that

any New England woman of that era who would have done as Sarah Penn does would surely have prevailed upon her husband to remodel the existing house years earlier ("An Autobiography" 65-66).

Apparently the author was genuinely surprised and a bit chagrined that this story had become by far her most famous, but Shirley Marchalonis suggests that her denial of its literal probability might well be tongue-in-cheek (10). Elizabeth Meese's deconstructionist reading interprets the story as "authentic" and the puzzling retraction as tragically "duplicitous" (170), inferring that the author was unwilling to admit in non-fiction to the subversive themes dramatized in the fiction (174). Despite Freeman's disclaimer, a great many of her other short stories also feature nonconformist heroines who startle their neighbors with some unconventional action, although Sarah Penn is surely one of the most heroic. Emily Dickinson would doubtless have delighted in these characters.

Freeman's retraction indeed seems simultaneously true and false. It is all too likely that most rural women of the nineteenth century may have resembled the unhappy queen mother of "The Twelve Brothers" or the conniving mother-in-law, rather than the heroic sister. Some would have been more submissive than Sarah Penn; others would have manipulated their husbands into yielding up the reins in all household



matters, as in the humorous scenario Freeman postulates in her essay ("An Autobiography" 66). The literal existence of a woman like Sarah Penn might well be as unlikely as the historical existence of Pope Joan, in the medieval legend mentioned in Chapter One. Yet the popularity of both stories might also be for similar reasons: a surprising number of people living in a patriarchal culture nonetheless wanted to believe in the possibility of such a heroine.

Like Pope Joan, Mrs. Penn embodies an ideal, representing what ought to be possible. Despite her mild demeanor, "her eyes . . . looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never the will of another" (418). She has submitted because, rightly or wrongly, she believed this to be the proper conduct of a good wife, but she finally rebels because she has changed her mind with the help of prayer but without seeking any institutional approval. Freeman's readers have evidently delighted in this independence of spirit, regardless of the literal probability of moving into the new barn. What matters is that we see Sarah's reasoning and sympathize with her, whereas Adoniram's position is never justified by the author.

Unlike the queen-mother of "The Twelve Brothers," Sarah Penn dares to challenge patriarchal authority for the sake of herself and her children. Her story reminds us that many women of her time and ours

need to attain justice in the practical realm in order to increase their opportunities to strive for intellectual and imaginative fulfillment. Courageous and resourceful, Mrs. Penn inspires her children, astonishes her neighbors, and triumphs over her husband's unseeing obstinacy. At the same time she is non-violent and forgiving, a humbling example for more advantaged women of today. Like the folktale sister, she works many years in silence, but ultimately achieves her goal and receives her reward. Her story precisely captures the spirit of Emily Dickinson's Poem #681, especially in the draft version where another stanza precedes the one retained in a copy sent to Sue:

On the Bleakness of my Lot

Bloom I strove to raise--

Late--My Garden of a Rock--

Yielded Grape--and Maize--

Soil of Flint, if steady tilled--

Will refund the Hand--

Seed of Palm, by Lybian Sun

Fructified in Sand--

From the rocky soil of adversity the speaker harvests the elements of the Lord's Supper; after forty years of disappointed hopes Sarah Penn finds grace

to prepare her husband's favorite supper on the evening of their reconciliation.

### Conclusion

The writers considered in this chapter, and many of their contemporaries such as Helen Hunt Jackson, Louisa May Alcott, and Susan Warner, testify to the rich inner resources enabling women of nineteenth-century America to endure and sometimes transcend the limitations of their social circumstances. By privately, if not always publicly, appropriating for themselves the ideals of equality and individualism professed within Christian tradition, Romanticism, and American democracy, many women contrived to maintain their sanity and inspire their contemporaries and descendants by their lives and words. As Cheryl Walker has argued in her groundbreaking study of American women's poetry, The Nightingale's Burden, extensive parallels exist between the experiences and reactions of Emily Dickinson and those of other women writers (99).

More than their English counterparts, relatively well educated American women were often obliged to balance their spiritual and intellectual priorities with the practical management and physical labors required for household maintenance. As Walker describes, Dickinson was much occupied with the "classical occupations" of

keeping house, tending a garden, watching at bedsides, sending condolences. But Dickinson maintained her independence in spite of these outward shows of conformity. She could afford to compromise in what she considered minor areas of concern, since she remained uncompromising in the areas that were most important to her: poetry, perception, and private relations. (101)

Walker's conclusion that the poet's "sensibility was consistent in many important respects with the sensibility of other woman writers of her time" should be construed as a compliment to her and to them (109). Not only did Dickinson's achievements confer greater dignity on later women poets, as Walker contends (116), but they also reflect the gallantry of spirit she evidently shared with many other women whose names are little remembered.

According to Beth Maclay Doriani, what distinguished Dickinson from her female literary contemporaries was her daring stance of "prophetic visionary authority" (147). However, Doriani does regard Harriet Beecher Stowe as a possible model for the poet in that she too, more than any other female American novelist of their era, appropriated the role of a literary prophet (149-50). While acknowledging Joanne Dobson's perceptive analysis of the subversiveness of women writers in her Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence, Doriani moves beyond this analysis to demonstrate that

"Dickinson found in her own Christian tradition an empowering stance and strategies for assuming a prophetic voice" (151).

Dickinson brilliantly articulates the thoughts, emotions, and experiences that have been shared to some extent by many other women, rich and poor, married and single. Her letters repeatedly reveal her deep appreciation for the intangible gifts she received from numerous friends, relatives, and literary influences. It is only in this context that her genius can be valued at its true worth--in Higginson's metaphor, as the distillation of a million roses.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE ART TO SAVE:  
EMILY DICKINSON'S VOCATION AS FEMALE PROPHET

This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved  
you.

John 14:12

The Province of the Saved  
Should be the Art--To save—

Dickinson, #539

Joy and sorrow continually alternate throughout the poems of Emily Dickinson, but critical commentary has on the whole represented Dickinson as more tragic than triumphant. Feminist criticism has begun to revise this image, but seldom with attention to the poet's deep affinities with the Bible and with her religious heritage. On the other hand, those critics who do examine her relationship with Christianity have emphasized her identification with the suffering Jesus rather than with the risen Christ. Very few have explored the ways in which numerous poems and letters reveal the perspective of a female prophet, a remarkably Christlike figure who speaks with sublime authority. Whether interpreted as dramatic creation or an aspect of the poet's real self, Dickinson's prophet persona derives her authority from a central metaphorical relationship and reaches out in relationship to others through artistic expression. To portray this chain of relationships, Emily Dickinson draws upon her reading of the Bible and other

literature for her imagery of dedication and vocation, host and guest, marriage and royalty, sacramental celebration and the sharing of good news. Her prophet persona is, of course, complicated by being a woman whose spiritual vocation is publicly unrecognized by her culture and a poet whose gifts of bread and wine take the form of finely crafted words.<sup>1</sup>

Many readers have condescendingly speculated about Emily Dickinson's possible neurotic disorders, dysfunctional family relationships, or unknown love affairs as explanations of her reclusive lifestyle and her poetry. Such approaches seem inadequate in light of feminist scholarship, especially the work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar and of Suzanne Juhasz. In their landmark volume The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Dickinson, far from being a passive victim, consciously designed her life as a kind of narrative poem in which, through a variety of personae, she could resolve "both her anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination" (583). However, Gilbert and Gubar view her as a rebel largely outside the pale of traditional religion (see 643-50), and Juhasz analyzes her exploration of the inner life with little reference to her religious heritage. Juhasz does conclude that Dickinson's "act of doing her best work is at least partly responsible for creating" her best self and the best life possible for her (175). She perceptively affirms the poet's lifestyle as a "slant" revolution (175), as profoundly feminist as any external social reform. This insight is

reinforced by the present study's analysis of religious imagery in various poems, in which the female speaker audaciously celebrates her vocation as recipient and transmitter of spiritual mysteries.

Other critics, most notably Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, have examined Dickinson's poems in the context of their creator's Christian heritage, but with limited emphasis on their feminist dimension. As Oberhaus explains, Dickinson's Christological poems belong to the devotional tradition extending from "The Dream of the Rood" through the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets to Hopkins and such twentieth-century poets as Eliot and Auden ("Tender Pioneer" 341). Such writers see in the story of Christ "a prefiguration or foreshadowing of the lives of His followers" (342). Dickinson often implies that Christ's sharing of human vulnerability makes him more approachable than the Calvinist image of God the Father (see #357: "God is a distant--stately Lover"). Although the Crucifixion is the most frequent subject among Dickinson's allusions to the Gospel story itself (Oberhaus, "Tender Pioneer" 354), many of her poems are startlingly unconventional in that the female speaker resembles the risen Christ, claiming authority through her dedication to an ambiguous Master to bring healing to others.

Dickinson's affinity with the antinomian tradition of biblical prophecy has been noted by Herbert Schneidau, who observes that "a pervasive suspicion of communal orthodoxy runs through the Bible" (26-27), as it does



through Dickinson's poems. However, Schneidau does not address the poet's remarkable assertiveness as a female critic of society's institutions, and he greatly exaggerates the degree of her isolation from her religious and literary milieu. Thus, Karl Keller, Jane Donahue Eberwein, and, most recently, Beth Maclay Doriani are among the few critics who overtly unite feminist and religious approaches to Emily Dickinson. Doriani examines the poet's distinctive place in a biblically rooted tradition of prophecy within American culture, calling upon other scholars to consider "the ways in which she drew on her religious surroundings to achieve liberation within her own cultural context, patriarchal as that culture was" (2).

Furthermore, the historian Gerda Lerner places Dickinson in a still more extensive tradition of many other women through the centuries who sought intellectual and spiritual development despite patriarchal restraints (181-91). This historical context is extremely significant because it further establishes the poet's relative normality and testifies to her courage, inasmuch as she--like most intellectual women until recent years--had difficulty accessing information about her foremothers. Lerner directly compares Dickinson with the great women mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich (181), indirectly implying that the poet is part of the tradition of feminist biblical interpretation which Lerner dates from at least the third century A.D., noting

that it still remains widely unknown even to twentieth-century biblical feminists (166). Lerner's research leads her to conclude that whereas men's contributions to civilization are facilitated by the knowledge that they are standing "on the shoulders of giants" (a phrase originally used by Bernard of Clairvaux), women repeatedly reinvent wheels because they lack knowledge of the work of women before them (166). Since Doriani does not examine Dickinson's affinities with religious thought prior to the colonial period, or with creative literature outside America, the present study complements Doriani's portrait of Dickinson as prophet by building upon Lerner's findings, expanding upon a few of the poems Doriani mentions and further embellishing the portrayal with numerous other illustrations from the Dickinson canon. A few of the examples included in this chapter have been discussed by Keller, Eberwein, or Oberhaus, but the majority of the poems examined here have not been considered together in a religious and feminist context.

We have already seen many instances in which the speaker of various Dickinson poems resembles other literary heroines, whether intentionally or not. Dickinson's affinity with the sister of the twelve brothers, prototype of these heroines, becomes very clear in light of Joanne Dobson's analysis of the poet's reticence in art and life. Dobson emphasizes that Dickinson's poetry reflects both assent and dissent with her culture's definitions and

expectations of womanhood (xi-xii). Although writing was an acceptable activity for women, the expression of sexual passion, anger, or aspirations for achievement and recognition outside the family was widely discouraged (2). Many other women writers used little girl protagonists similar to some of Dickinson's personae because anger and ambition were somewhat more permissible in youthful characters (18-19). Although the art of some other women writers was more conservative than their lives, Dickinson's life was more conservative than her art (26). Dobson suggests that her self-image as "a private, domestic woman, sanctioned by the cultural ideal, most likely played a significant role in her increasing seclusion within the home and her decision not to publish" (41). Like the folktale heroine, she became a "silent sister," intent on accomplishing her chosen mission which remained unknown to the casual observer and even to many of her friends.

What this choice cost her can only be imagined. Dobson agrees with Juhasz and Gilbert and Gubar that Dickinson's lifestyle was voluntary rather than pathologically determined, but takes a less optimistic view of that possibility (48). Even though some female writers managed to lead relatively active lives, not every individual is equally capable of devoting energy effectively in many different directions at once. If we accept Dobson's description of the restrictions on female self-expression and assertiveness, it becomes very easy to see that Dickinson might have compensated both

consciously and unconsciously for her artistic and intellectual boldness by taking care that her writing caused as little inconvenience as possible to others. If she scrupulously did her duty as one of the busy women maintaining the Dickinson household and sought no fame and fortune for herself, perhaps she could make up for any possible transgressions of divine or human codes that might be held against her. Others might write in behalf of social reform in the public domain, but, as Dobson puts it, Dickinson's private "reform movement" was to be "an advocate for the understanding and precise representation of complex and painful individual human experience" (97), and especially to articulate the "silent" side of individual women's experience (127). At the same time, she had an amazing ability to articulate the joys of human existence and place them within reach of the wide readership that her poetry has at last attained.

The self that a poet creates is at least as real as the elusive self that is born in a certain age and shaped by a certain family in a particular heritage; in fact it is if anything more influential. Although Dickinson seems to have been adept at imaginatively identifying with various literary or actual personae, it seems reasonable to reiterate Juhasz's argument, already mentioned, that Dickinson also created her best self in the act of doing her best work. Her passionate interest in literary foremothers and admirable heroines must surely have enabled her development of the voice of a

conscious prophet, alert to receive inspiration whenever and wherever it may come, and confident of the authenticity and value of the message she proclaims. Several of her prophetic poems focus on the moment of the speaker's dedication to her calling; another cluster uses host and guest imagery to convey the speaker's central relationship; and still others focus on her ministry to others.

### Choosing a Crown: Dickinson's Calling

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things.

Luke 1:49

And I Choose, just a Crown--

Dickinson, #508

The poems of dedication have received more critical study than the others mentioned. For example, Eberwein notes that the speaker of #508 ("I'm ceded--I've stopped being Their's") is one of Dickinson's most "self-sufficient, self-defined" personae (45). Richard Sewall similarly cites this poem as an expression of joyous fulfillment (2: 504). As Vivian Pollak has shown, #508 may be interpreted in terms of religious conversion, marriage, or poetic vocation (120). Either baptism or marriage is a richly appropriate symbol for entrance upon a new stage of life. The speaker rejoices in her newfound freedom to choose her "Crown," yet also describes herself as being

"Called to my Full," as the recipient of "Grace." The references to being "ceded" and to changing her name suggest the image of a bride, which supports the impression of a new or deepened relationship with someone as opposed to a state of total independence.

Another much-discussed dedicatory poem is #271 ("A solemn thing--it was--I said-- / A Woman--white--to be"). Here the speaker describes her vocation as "hallowed," a state entered into only "if God should count me fit." She recalls pondering whether the bliss of dedication to her "blameless mystery" would be as great as it had appeared beforehand, and affirms that the size of her seemingly small life has indeed "Swelled--like Horizons." Gilbert and Gubar have explored the potential significance of Dickinson's white dresses as symbolizing a wide range of personae that she may have adopted in life as well as in her art--a child, "a fierce virgin . . . , a nun . . . , a bride . . . , a madwoman . . . , a dead woman . . . , and a ghost" (621). In #271, as in #508, the speaker seems to be blending together the more positive and fulfilling of these roles. Yet, as Doriani emphasizes, Dickinson seems to feel she must keep her calling a secret, perhaps because "few people in her day would have encouraged either female prophecy or a woman's seizure of special status" (86).

For Gilbert and Gubar, Dickinson's method is "to put the vocabulary of religion to the uses of poetry" (612). Similarly, Vincent P. Anderson believes

that Dickinson found in poetry "a kind of answer to or compensation for the lack of an easily recognizable divine presence in her own experience," much as Matthew Arnold suggested that poetry would become a substitute or replacement for religion in the modern world (5). However, it may be argued that Emily Dickinson could not dispense so easily with the claims of religion, despite her reiterated dissatisfaction with her Calvinist heritage. Eberwein offers a more complex account of the matter:

Deprived of routine religious consolation, she worked out her own strategies for growth. . . . Rather than substituting literature for religion, she used its resources as instruments of her own religious development. Despite her many deprivations, she had received gifts as well--chief among them being the verbal fluency and the imagination that had been her delights from childhood. (69)

This argument seems well supported by Poem #454 ("It was given to me by the Gods-- / When I was a little Girl"). Again, the speaker asserts the pricelessness of her gift, which she has never taken for granted. She smiled when others spoke of riches, for "'Twas Myself--was rich-- / To take the name of Gold-- / And Gold to own--in solid Bars--." As in #508, her secret wealth seems to derive from a secret relationship, which becomes more explicit in other poems.

In #273, for example, the speaker combines the memory of the moment of dedication with a description of her subsequently altered life. She recalls,

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-- [. . .]

According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, it is God who turns away imperially while the speaker experiences loss through the transaction. She gives up personal autonomy to be a "Member of the Cloud" and ends in a "trivial round of making calls and receiving visitors, always willing to decline should her master so decree" (333-34). But Vivian Pollak points out the ambiguity of the first stanza: it may equally be the speaker who is turning away with a new identity as a member of the imperial service (168-69). This possibility leads more grammatically to the speaker's self-description in the final lines of the stanza as "a Dedicated sort--." Judith Farr perceptively continues this interpretation in her analysis of the transaction's consequences, described in the second stanza. The speaker is "not too far to come at call-- / And do the little Toils" for others, perhaps implying the poet's household obligations, but she must limit her social contacts (32). She will "deal occasional smiles" to



those who "kindly ask [her] in-- / Whose invitation, know you not / For Whom I must decline?" Furthermore, the question "know you not . . .?" syntactically and thematically echoes that of the boy Jesus when his mother reproved him for staying behind in the Temple in Jerusalem: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Emily Dickinson would surely have sympathized with the youth who had suddenly gained some new awareness of his identity and prophetic mission, but returned home for some years "to come at call" and perform "the little Toils" for his earthly parents.

Dickinson's "shorthand" references to the Bible, as Richard Sewall terms them (698), are more obvious in the various poems developing the metaphor of host and guest. Christ is of course traditionally the Host of the Lord's Supper, as Congregationalists referred to the communion service, and heaven is frequently represented as God's house where human wanderers are welcomed. Jesus declares, "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you" in Matthew 7:7, but conversely says in Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." Oberhaus has called attention to the relevance of the latter image to Dickinson's host-guest poems ("A Reading" 361). For example, Poem #674 explains,

The Soul that hath a Guest

Doth seldom go abroad--

Diviner Crowd at Home--

Obliterate the need--

The speaker goes on to say that "Courtesy" prevents a "Host" from leaving home when the "Emperor of Men" is visiting. Perhaps for Dickinson this metaphor from the tradition of devotional poetry became a literal expression of her chosen lifestyle.

Logically enough, the divine guest's presence is not always evident. In #1055 ("The Soul should always stand ajar"), the poet emphasizes the need for spiritual readiness lest "the Heaven" cease to wait for his welcome and "Depart, before the Host have slid / The Bolt unto the Door." Here Dickinson's images parallel a passage from the Song of Songs, another work in which the lovers can be interpreted literally, as well as symbolically representing God and humanity:

It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open  
to me, my sister, my love. . . .

I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped  
with myrrh . . . upon the handles of the lock.

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn  
 himself, and was gone. . . . I sought him, but I could not find  
 him. (5:2-6)

Judith Farr comments on the similarly multilayered imagery of #1055: "The narrow gate, open to but one, is a brilliantly erotic and yet maidenly and even Puritan image." Farr adds that the poet "seems to be describing artistic inspiration as well as grace" (86).

In another striking juxtaposition of the cosmic and the everyday, as Sewall notes (720), Dickinson acknowledges that the "Infinite" is only "assumed" to be a "Guest" but in reality "never" goes away (#1309). In her more jubilant poems, the entire host-guest metaphor begins to break down as she celebrates a relationship of startling equality, whether divine, human, or both:

He was my host--he was my guest,  
 I never to this day  
 If I invited him could tell,  
 Or he invited me. (#1721)

With characteristic ambiguity, the speaker of #1721 proclaims herself "keeper of the seed," a potentially erotic phrase which serves equally well to express her stewardship of the divine "seed" which she brings to fruition in her poetry (see Oberhaus, "A Reading" 364).

Dickinson uses a poignant variation of the spouse-as-guest image shortly after her mother's death in Letter 785: "[T]he grass that received my father will suffice his guest, the one he asked at the altar to visit him all his life." Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine Edward Dickinson as anything but "host" of the Homestead--certainly not as his wife's "guest." Although the marriage of Christ and the soul is a traditional metaphor, the "infinite" and "intimate" marriage of #1721 succinctly undermines patriarchal concepts of divine or husbandly authority, for, as Oberhaus notes, "the speaker cannot be sure who is host and who is guest" ("A Reading" 364).

The same ambiguity and revolutionary sense of equality may be found in the relatively early Poem #190 ("He was weak, and I was strong--then-- / So He let me lead him in"). On one level, this moving lyric may be read as a traditional lovers' aubade, reminiscent of John Donne's (see Wolff 367). But there may be religious symbolism in these lines as well, especially in light of Poem #59, Dickinson's version of Jacob's wrestling with the angel (see Genesis 32). In the first stanza of #190, the soul may be recalling her role as "host" to a divine guest, and then her role as guest, led home to heaven when the weakness of death overtook her. The assurance that the way there was neither "far" nor "dark" but made easier by the presence of the other fits well with this interpretation. In the final stanza, the couple are evenly matched and refusing to part, like the host and guest of #1721. A similar equality

and/or confusion of identity appears in Dickinson's very late letters mentioning Jacob and the angel, as Sewall has pointed out: in Letter 1035 she has the angel asking for the blessing, and in Letter 1042 Jacob speaks the line but reverses the pronouns (698). Perhaps this reversal conveys the poet's "blessing" of gratitude to Higginson for being her friend and at least nominally her preceptor.

Who is host and who is guest? Who wins the mysterious wrestling match which becomes indistinguishable from a love match? In Letter 355 the poet remarks, "Home is the definition of God." In this simple statement Dickinson paradoxically affirms both immanence and transcendence. Karl Keller astutely observes,

Emily Dickinson's Puritan view of womanhood is particularly striking in the daring with which she pictures herself as a woman who is the minion (at least the partner, the cohort, certainly the challenger, and perhaps "just the weight") of God. . . . What God has given her makes her a rival of God. . . . Her security of faith has made it possible to be assertive. . . . It is not heresy but accomplishment. She is not witch but Woman. (29)

Indeed, Dickinson might have found a precedent for such assertiveness in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-53), Mary's song of the Lord who has made her a partner in accomplishing the divine purpose.

### Considering the Lilies: Dickinson's Mission

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they toil not; neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. . . .

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Matthew 6:28-33

Through the dark Sod--as Education--  
The Lily passes sure--  
Feels her firm foot--no trepidation--  
Her faith--no fear.

Afterwards in the Meadow--  
Swinging her beryl bell--  
The Mold-life all forgotten now  
In Extasy--and Dell--

Dickinson, #392

In addition to the foregoing examples portraying the speaker's intimate familiarity with divine/artistic mysteries, Emily Dickinson creates many poems where the speaker asserts herself as prophetic messenger of these mysteries to others. As early as Poem #95, she declares that "My nosegays are for captives," to whom her words might "whisper / Of morning and the moor." Oberhaus points out that the word "nosegays" is a synonym for "fascicles" in the poet's well-worn dictionary--a possible indication of her desire that her works would one day reach a wider audience (Emily Dickinson's Fascicles 44). Analogously, Poem #1233 ("Had I not seen the

sun") recalls Plato's parable of the cave. To the rare individual who has seen the sun, the cave where his companions dwell is little better than Dickinson's "wilderness." The light of the sun is incomprehensible to the captives remaining in the cave. Dickinson memorably expresses the same principle in #1129 ("Tell all the Truth but tell it slant"):

As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind--

Sewall has suggested that this poem may express her feelings about revealing her poetic vocation to her young friends and family (2:389). In any case, Dickinson chose to tell her truths gradually and indirectly, much as Christ conveyed his teachings through parable and paradox (see Doriani 118-19).

Another poem, seemingly humble at first but subtly becoming assertive as it progresses, was sent to Samuel Bowles as well as preserved in Fascicle 10: #224 ("I've nothing else--to bring, You Know--"). Although it may have accompanied a gift of flowers, it is probable that Dickinson was making a statement about her poems. We scarcely notice the stars because they are so "familiar," she suggests, but if they "didn't come," it might "puzzle us / To find our way Home--." Returning to the parallel set up in the first stanza, it

follows that the gifts the poet brings may also light the "way Home" for future readers.

A more direct claim to authority appears in #446, which was sent to Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Here the poet tells of showing a reluctant audience "Hights she never saw" and "Secrets--Morning's Nest-- / The Rope the Nights were put across"--a list reminiscent of the catalogue of God's secrets in Chapters 38 and 39 of the book of Job. Judith Farr reads the poem as a highly personal message to Sue, the unwilling beloved who refuses to climb with the speaker (158). Noting the existence of an alternate version in Fascicle 16, "in which Dickinson's speaker is a woman being wooed by a man," Farr remarks in passing that the two versions demonstrate that the poet could easily "adapt her passionate thoughts across gender" (159).

Yet the version "He showed me Hights" has strongly religious connotations, including the gentle question "Would'st have me for a Guest?" If the words "He brake his life" are taken to suggest Christ's sacrifice, the final question "And could I, further, `No'?" may well be rhetorical. The fascicle version can usefully be compared with #964, a relatively unambiguous conversation between the soul and Jesus, and with George Herbert's "Love bade me welcome." This interpretation adds a new dimension to the variant sent to Sue, although the homoerotic element is not necessarily ruled out thereby. If Emily Dickinson accepted an invitation to



heights which she longed to share with Sue, but which the latter could not understand, the epistolary version becomes the lament of the unheeded prophet whose vision of the sun is rejected by her less perceptive companions. Taken together, the two variants suggest more than the adaptation of passionate language to a listener of either gender; they imply a female writer's striking assumption of a Christlike role.

Similarly audacious is the ringing declaration of #539, "The Province of the Saved / Should be the Art--To save." The remainder of the poem is comparatively orthodox, observing that "the Science of the Grave" can only be understood by one who has "endured / . . . Dissolution--in Himself." In a brilliant play on words, the poet asserts that only one who has thus suffered is "qualified / To qualify Despair" by relieving the pain of others who "Mistake Defeat for Death." These lines might be a tribute to Christ as the only one who has literally endured and overcome death, but they could also refer to any human beings whose experience of suffering enables them to bring healing consolation to others. Millicent Todd Bingham reports a remarkably parallel description of the Rev. Charles Wadsworth by one Rev. George Burrows of San Francisco in 1862:

You feel that behind all he says there must be lying years of conflict and agony, of trials and sorrows, of deep gloom and despondency, of strong cries and tears, of heavenly fellowship

and confidential friendship with God. . . . He preaches consolation like a man who knows how to succor others because he has himself been compassed with suffering. (qtd. in Bingham 368)

It is tempting to speculate that Dickinson may have had Wadsworth in mind when composing # 539. However, it is even more probable, as Doriani believes, that she was describing her own qualifications to "qualify Despair" (168), reasoning that it is the responsibility of the "Saved" to reach out to others. The suggestion that anyone but Christ has the power to save is hardly orthodox Calvinist theology, of course, but the poet quickly softens the shock of her opening aphorism by developing a more conventional train of thought. Throughout her life's work, however, Dickinson leaves little doubt that human beings may be agents of God's grace, whether they be publicly ordained priests, privately called prophets, or any other persons who know the meaning of love. In her own case, Emily Dickinson practiced "the Art--To save" through the art of poetry. Willis J. Buckingham calls attention to the speaker's sense of mission in #1109:

I fit for them--

I seek the Dark

.....

With this sufficient sweet  
 That abstinence of mine produce  
 A purer food for them, if I succeed,  
 If not I had  
 The transport of the Aim--

These lines, Buckingham explains, are consistent with the devotionalist religious movement during the poet's lifetime that encouraged the view of "poetry making" as "satisfying work (like letter writing and gift giving) that would nourish and strengthen others" (242).

The courage to "seek the Dark" is a recurrent theme in Dickinson's work. For example, Karl Keller implies--but does not develop--a parallel between Poems #539, "The Province of the Saved," and #392 : "Through the Dark Sod--as Education-- / The Lily passes sure--" (91). Here the female "Lily" traverses the same journey as the generic "Man" of #539. Like the resurrected Christ, she rises from darkness into new life. The lily, mentioned several times in Dickinson's letters, had long been associated with the Madonna in art and poetry. In paintings of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel is often portrayed carrying a lily. Moreover, the lily had clearly become associated with Easter by Emily Dickinson's time, as evidenced by her appreciation of a gift of lilies near the anniversary of her mother's death: "The beloved lilies have come, and my heart is so high it overflows, as this

was Mother's week, Easter in November" (L #952). Somewhat similarly, in Poem #392 the Lily's passage "Through the Dark Sod" and her "Extasy" in the "Meadow" seem to be simultaneously in the present tense.

In lighter moments, Dickinson alludes to Christ's commandment, "Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not; neither do they spin" (Matt. 6:28), as in Letter #904, where she remarks that this is "the only Commandment I ever obeyed." Although she was presumably referring to her disinclination to spend more time than necessary on domestic tasks, she may also have been recalling the theme of the complete passage in Matthew, which concludes, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." This attitude of single-minded dedication is frequently reflected in Dickinson's writings and in others' reactions to her. In an 1863 letter to Austin, Samuel Bowles jestingly sent his regards thus: ". . . to the Queen Recluse my especial sympathy--that she has 'overcome the world.'-- Is it really true that they sing 'Old Hundred" and 'Alleluia' perpetually, in heaven--ask her; and are dandelions, asphodels, & Maiden's [vows] the standard flowers of the ethereal?" (Leyda 2:76). Dickinson's ability to be in the world yet not of it is similarly suggested by Poem # 373:

I'm saying every day

"If I should be a Queen, tomorrow"--

I'd do this way--

And so I deck, a little,

.....

Court is a stately place--

I've heard men say--

So I loop my apron, against the Majesty

With bright Pins of Buttercup--

That not too plain--

Rank--overtake me--

.....

Better to be ready--

Than did next morn

Meet me in Arragon--

My old Gown--on--

And the surprised Air

Rustics--wear--

Summoned unexpectedly--

To Exeter--

It may be that composing such poems and preserving them in her manuscript books constituted both the means and result of being in this state of readiness.

Although caution must be exercised in attributing significance to the inclusion of thematically related poems in the same fascicle, the Manuscript Books show that one of Dickinson's most direct celebrations of poetic genius, #448 ("This was a Poet--") is preserved in Fascicle 21, which also includes #454, discussed above ("It was given to me by the Gods"). Moreover, #539 ("The Province of the Saved") immediately follows #538 ("'Tis true--They shut me in the Cold--") in Fascicle 30. The speaker of the latter poem appears to be conversing with God as with an equal immediately after her death, earnestly requesting his mercy on those who have caused her pain. Echoing Christ's own prayer from the cross, she explains that her loved ones "could not know the feeling" she suffered, and concludes "Forgive Them--Even as Myself-- / Or else--forgive not me--." Here the "Art--To save" is literally embodied in the form of the poem itself. Furthermore, Fascicle 30 also includes #544, an affirmation of the mission of artists:

The Martyr Poets--did not tell--  
 But wrought their Pang in syllable--  
 That when their mortal name be numb--  
 Their mortal fate--encourage Some--

However, no other poems examined in this study can be found in a single fascicle, and some exist only in copies outside the fascicles. Thus, Dickinson appears to have continued exploring and redefining her role as prophet-poet at intervals throughout her life.

For example, the "Extasy" of Poem #392 is echoed in a cluster of brief poems that have received much less attention than Dickinson's more tragic reflections. Three of these have been preserved only through transcripts made by Susan Gilbert Dickinson, which may indicate that the poet sent them to her at various times. In #1665 the speaker regrets she cannot share her joy with those who have died without hearing "the news I know to-night" that "expands the least event / And swells the scantest deed." The source of her joy is suggested in #1668: "If I could tell how glad I was / I should not be so glad--." The "Dilemma" of translating the gladness "into Word" reflects the indescribable nature of "Eternity." In #1669, the same mood is expressed as prophetic reassurance to an audience (whether Sue or any reader):

In snow thou comest  
 Thou shalt go with the resuming ground  
 The sweet derision of the crow  
 And Glee's advancing sound

In fear thou comest  
 Thou shalt go at such a gait of joy  
 That men anew embark to live  
 Upon the depth of thee--

These lines recall Psalm 126: 5-6: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." However, Dickinson reverses the images, so that coming is associated with sorrow and winter, and going is associated with joy and spring--possibly as a reminder that the ultimate departure of death is a journey into new life.

Still another related poem, #1726, preserved only through a transcript made by Mabel Todd, celebrates the foretaste of "Extasy" in the present:

If all the griefs I am to have  
 Would only come today,  
 I am so happy I believe  
 They'd laugh and run away.

Together these poems reiterate the theme of wondrous revelation received by the speaker, who attempts to communicate something of its joy to others.

Curiously, two of Dickinson's richest extended metaphors for her vocation have gone virtually unexamined by major critics. Poem #503 is quite uncharacteristic in terms of meter, for it contains no fewer than six



quatrains, all in tetrameter throughout. This unexpected rhythm may be deliberately suited to the poem's breathless attempt to convey a revelation through musical terminology:

Better--than Music! For I--who heard it--  
 I was used--to the Birds--before--  
 This--was different--"Twas Translation--  
 Of all tunes I knew--and more--

In Calvinist tradition, "Children" are "told how Brooks in Eden-- / Bubbled a better--Melody" than those heard upon earth today. As they mature, "Children" often dismiss "Eden" as "a legend dimly told." In contrast, the speaker asserts she is "telling a tune" she herself has heard, a melody surpassing the music of the Church even "When the Redemption strikes her Bells." The poem concludes:

Let me not spill--its smallest cadence--  
 Humming--for promise--when alone--  
 Humming--until my faint Rehearsal--  
 Drop into tune--around the Throne-

In short, a lifetime is too brief for the rehearsing of this elusive melody, in an effort to get it right so that the speaker will be in tune "around the Throne." The female singer's claim to direct knowledge of a music transcending that of religious institutions is, once again, strikingly subversive of patriarchal

norms, yet profoundly in the tradition of biblical prophecy. Dickinson uses the same musical metaphor and unusual tetrameter rhythm, a bit more humbly, in #250, "I shall keep singing!" Other "Birds" may reach their destination before the speaker, but when she at last arrives at her "place in summer" her voice will contribute to a "fuller tune" even as it will in #503.

Another of the poet's most revealing descriptions of her artistic practice appears in #1452:

Your thoughts don't have words every day  
 They come a single time  
 Like signal esoteric sips  
 Of the communion Wine  
 Which while you taste so native seems  
 So easy so to be  
 You cannot comprehend its price  
 Nor its infrequency

Here the dominant metaphor is drawn from the sacrament of communion. Like the soul who must leave the door ajar, the poet must be in readiness for the right words, which will not be forthcoming "every day." Rather, they come "a single time," like the melody of #503 which none can play "a second time." The moment of finding the perfect words parallels the communion with divinity at the Lord's Supper, a sacrament Dickinson would have been

too young to receive as a child and would have been barred from receiving in adulthood since she did not officially join the church. Rare though the wine of inspiration is, it paradoxically seems "easy"--a word for which the poet considered a number of variants on the pencilled worksheet draft containing these lines. In the moment of joy, one can no longer remember its high "price" of disciplined time and energies, nor the pain of its "infrequency," even as the communicant may find the consecrated "Wine / . . . so native" that the price of Christ's suffering is forgotten in the "infinite" intimacy Dickinson elsewhere describes. In this poem, as with many others, faith and art become as intermingled as host and guest, lover and beloved. It may be that Emily Dickinson found such distinctions more artificial than do many of her twentieth-century critics.

As the poet herself says, it was not "every day" that she could hear the distant music and taste the wine of inspiration. Over the years she sent numerous condolence letters studded with striking images that convey common doubts and fears as well as expressions of sympathy. Considering the frequency of untimely deaths during the nineteenth century, it is not surprising so many of her poems meditate on the threat of death and the hope of immortality. It should be recalled that Jesus himself reputedly wept over the death of his friend Lazarus, even though he raised him to life shortly afterwards (John 11). Emily Dickinson seems to have been similarly

capable of acknowledging conflicting emotions concerning human mortality at any given moment--within a single text. A letter to Mrs. Holland in the fall of 1879 records a conversation illuminating the increased honesty and intimacy between the poet and her mother during their later years:

Mother does not stand alone and fears she shall never walk, but  
I tell her we all shall fly so soon, not to let it grieve her, and  
what indeed is Earth but a Nest, from whose rim we are all  
falling? (L#619).

The gallant humor of this remark, discouraging self-pity, may suggest something of the strength seen in Emily Dickinson by those who knew her best. After Mrs. Dickinson's death in 1882, the poet used the same image of flight in two separate letters, to Mrs. Hills (L#778) and to Mrs. Holland: "She soared from us unexpectedly as a summoned Bird" (L#779). "We hope that our Sparrow has ceased to fall, though at first we believe nothing," she adds later in the same letter to Mrs. Holland, unflinchingly expressing the discrepancy between the faith she strives for and the emptiness of grief.

Dickinson's mixed emotions are similarly expressed in Letter #418, written to T. W. Higginson soon after Edward Dickinson's death: "I am glad there is Immortality--but would have tested it myself--before entrusting him." A few years later, when Higginson's wife died, she sent him Poem #1433, beginning "How brittle are the Piers / On which our Faith doth tread," but

concluding that God "sent his Son to test the Plank, / And he pronounced it firm." This hardly-won faith is breathlessly affirmed in Poem #1492:

"And with what body do they come? "--

Then they do come--Rejoice!

What Door--What Hour--Run--run--My Soul!

Illuminate the House!

Although alluding to the eloquent passage on immortality in I Corinthians 15, the poet impishly chooses to quote what St. Paul regards as the question of a fool who inquires too closely into eternity's secrets.

#### Journey to the Day: Dickinson's Legacy

The night is far spent; the day is at hand.

Romans 13:12

No coward soul is mine  
 No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere  
 I see Heaven's glories shine  
 And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

"Last Lines" --Emily Bronte

I sing to use the Waiting  
 My Bonnet but to tie  
 And shut the Door unto my House  
 No more to do have I

Till his best step approaching  
 We journey to the Day  
 And tell each other how We sang  
 To Keep the Dark away

Dickinson, #850

In life as in art, Emily Dickinson moved back and forth between hope and despair, sorrow and joy, but her friends and family seem to have remembered her serene integrity rather than any dysfunctional tendencies. David Reynolds has argued that her experimental poetics, far from reflecting psychological disturbance, represents the finest flowering of artistic ideals sought more tentatively by other women writers (419), as well as her unique responsiveness to both male and female literary voices in her culture (437). Despite whatever disadvantages she suffered as a woman, she seems to have had a remarkable capacity for friendships with men--Newton, Bowles, Higginson, Joseph Lyman, John Graves, and many others--not to mention her complex relationship with Austin. Her perspective on her brother's troubled marriage and his affair with Mabel Todd may never be fully known, but Sewall concludes that she and Lavinia listened to Austin's sorrows and permitted him to meet with Mabel in their home (178), even while she continued to write loving notes to Susan. Sewall also notes that the poet herself was deeply attached to Judge Lord in the early years of Austin's involvement with Mabel Todd (184); perhaps Austin's situation was a sobering reminder of the pain attendant upon living a life torn between opposing commitments.

Certainly an earthly husband might well have misunderstood and nearly destroyed Dickinson, even as the young king in the folktale of the

sister who saves her brothers almost had her executed because of her inexplicable behavior. Although many scholars have sought to establish the identity of the "Master" figure in Dickinson's letters and supposedly related poems, it seems unlikely that all poems addressed to a male beloved are necessarily written with the same person in mind, whether mortal or divine. Some might well express her emotional response to certain human relationships, while others more probably convey the anticipation of being "a Queen, tomorrow," embraced by the Divine Lover, as in "A Wife--at Daybreak I shall be--" (#461), which concludes, "Eternity, I'm coming--Sir, / Savior--I've seen the face--before!"

Dickinson's final note to the Norcrosses read,

Little Cousins,

Called back.

Emily (L#1046)

Called Back was the title of an extremely popular novel by Hugh Conway, which Benjamin Lease summarizes in Emily Dickinson's Reading of Men and Books. The hero, Gilbert Vaughan, suffers an eye affliction that leaves him temporarily blind. He and his beloved Pauline are present at the scene of her brother's murder, which sends her into a state of amnesia. Eventually Pauline serves as medium for a mysterious reenactment of the crime. Lease explains,

The narrator is 'called back' to that which he had previously 'seen'; the young woman he loves is 'called back' from her mental darkness. . . . After numerous complications, Gilbert Vaughan penetrates the mystery surrounding the crime and tracks down the criminals. And the empty marriage of Gilbert and Pauline, contracted while she was mentally afflicted, is transformed into a true union. (128-29)

In short, the characters are called back to sight, to sanity, and to love, all of which Emily Dickinson at some time feared to lose, at least in some of her poems if not in reality, and all of which she had come to anticipate in the other land she was approaching. To the very end of her life, she continued to draw upon her reading to construct her vision of the human condition.

Whatever shadows may have darkened their relationship over the years, Susan Dickinson felt moved to eulogize her sister-in-law with unqualified respect in an obituary in the Springfield Republican:

So intimate and passionate was her love of Nature, she seemed herself a part of the high March sky, the summer day and bird-call. Keen and eclectic in her literary tastes, she sifted libraries to Shakespeare and Browning; quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words, by which she must make her



revelation. To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulated faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer. (rpt. in Leyda 2:473)

Supplementing Sue's tribute in Jay Leyda's compilation are the memorable records of Emily Dickinson's funeral on May 19, 1886. By all accounts it was an indescribably beautiful spring day, with buttercups, violets, and wild geraniums filling the lawns and fields between the Homestead and the cemetery. At the service, Thomas Wentworth Higginson read Emily Bronte's poem, "No coward soul is mine," saying that Dickinson had frequently read this passage to her sister (Leyda 2:475). Much of Dickinson's poetry would not be widely admired for many decades, but her character could hardly have been more warmly honored by those who knew her well.

Raised in a religious tradition that did not follow the seasons of the natural year with liturgical cycles, Emily Dickinson developed her own symbolism based upon the seasonal changes and beauties which delighted her throughout life, as outlined in a detailed chart by Barton Levi St. Armand (317). Admonished to be grateful to Christ for appeasing God the Father's wrath, she wrestled like Jacob with the stranger she could not

escape (see P#59, L#1042) until she won the blessing of a spiritual vision resembling that of the early Celtic churches of the British Isles before they came under the central control of Rome (as described in the introductory chapter of this study). Drawing upon the Bible, the indigenous Druidic religion, the individualistic Desert Fathers of the Church, and the teachings of the theologian Pelagius (declared a heretic by Rome), early Celtic literature is characterized by an intense love of nature, an emphasis on individual moral choice and forgiveness rather than on original sin, a quirky sense of humor, a firm belief in simple living, a respect for men and women alike, and a vision of Jesus as an intimate friend rather than a remote authority (Van de Weyer 2-6). All these elements are directly or indirectly to be found in Dickinson's life and art. Even the gnomic poems common in Celtic literature, in which a vivid natural image is strikingly juxtaposed with some observation of human experience, are very like some of Dickinson's poems. If Dickinson never knew of her affinities with Celtic Christianity, it only testifies further to the brilliance of her thought and to Gerda Lerner's argument that too much female talent has been expended upon re-creating forgotten visions.

Dickinson's influence on literary studies has increased very gradually since her death; her relevance to the integration of Christian and feminist thought is only beginning to be visible. Many women continue to grow up,

like the poet, in an evangelical tradition that impresses upon them the concept of the divine presence as unquestionably there, no matter how alarming or indifferent that presence might seem. Like Dickinson, they cannot escape into comfortable unbelief and thus have no alternative but to seek a more bearable interpretation of their faith. As Margaret Homans remarks, the youthful Emily Dickinson "does not doubt that Christianity is in the right and she is in the wrong" (167), but over the years she "proposes a revision in the entire structure of patriarchal religion" (214). Although Homans might not agree, the present study suggests that the poet contrives to revise the interpretation of Christianity in such a way that it and she are both "in the right," setting an example for later feminists rooted in a similar religious tradition.

One of the most influential spokeswomen of the evangelical feminist movement in the late twentieth century is Reta Finger (for many years editor of the Christian feminist periodical Daughters of Sarah), who has cogently presented the distinctive nature of this branch of feminist theology in terms accessible to others who can identify all too well with Dickinson's ambivalence toward her received religion (see "Your Daughters Shall Prophesy" and "The Bible and Christian Feminism"). For example, in an analysis of three theories of Christ's atonement, Finger outlines the inadequacies of the commonly promoted substitutionary and moral influence

models of salvation and calls attention to the "Christus Victor" paradigm which predominated in the church for the first thousand years after Christ. In this model, humanity is delivered, not from God the Father's wrath, but from domination by evil powers, whether invisible or visible, societal or internal. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ are seen "as one continuing conflict with the powers of evil" ("How Can Jesus Save Women?" 16). In the tradition shared by Dickinson and Finger, one's belief system is assumed to be based upon the interpretation of certain primary texts, and the premise that all individuals should be educated enough to read and analyze these texts. Conflicts of interpretation are thus to be resolved by justifying one's theory of literary criticism, so to speak, rather than by deferring to institutional authority. In the long run, these assumptions have undermined unjust social structures as women and disadvantaged men have found support for their liberationist thought and action from biblical texts and finally from one another's texts.

In this context, Emily Dickinson becomes an encouraging symbol of human potential--and especially of female potential. David Reynolds cites an 1854 editorial by Paula Wright Davis, arguing that women's rights are advanced not only by public oratory and political activity, but also "by any independent working woman, by any woman novelist, by any woman editor," and by any woman who is a creative artist, "the holiest reformer of them all"

(397). Karen Dandurand has established that a considerable audience had begun to appreciate Dickinson's gifts during her lifetime through the sharing of poems enclosed in letters and the reprinting of the few poems that were published in newspapers--as well as Higginson's reading of her manuscripts to the New England Women's Club in 1875 (255-68). Although this semi-public dissemination was usually anonymous, allowing Dickinson to outwardly maintain the enigmatic role of the "silent sister," Poem #850 anticipates the "journey to the Day" amid companions who will "tell each other how We sang / To keep the Dark away." Even as her songs drew upon the resources of the Bible and other literature by her forebears and contemporaries, they in turn continue to inspire her ever-increasing company of readers.

The historian Gerda Lerner, from a very different era and religious tradition, has eloquently testified to Dickinson's achievement as female prophet:

She found a way out of the conditions her life presented to her, and in so doing she dismantled the cage of restraints which patriarchal definition had placed on women of talent. She transformed the "house of her father," which she never physically left and to whose rules she so ostentatiously submitted, into a free temple of ungendered humanity where the

soul stood naked and unencumbered, open at last to all possibilities. (191)

Paradoxically, one of Dickinson's significant accomplishments is precisely this transformation or re-presentation of her religious heritage through art so powerful as to inspire such respect from thoughtful feminists outside that heritage. The intellectual objectivity of Lerner's tribute, as part of her historical study of feminist biblical interpretation, helps to validate the compatibility of Christianity and feminism so often denied by more radical feminists and by antifeminist Christians.

Lerner places Dickinson in a long-neglected line of women who "were led to self-authorization by an acceptance of the demands of their talents" and for whom "the assertion of their full humanity before God, of their full equality as human beings and of their autonomy as thinkers were truly revolutionary expressions" (180-81). Dickinson constitutes a high point in the literary tradition manifesting the strong feminist undercurrents of Christianity, for she expresses prophetic wisdom in fresh and scintillating language in a voice of female authority. To overlook the religious, aesthetic, or feminist components of Emily Dickinson's legacy is to do less than justice to its enduring riches.

### Notes

1. Much of the material in this chapter has appeared in my essay by the same title in Christianity and Literature 47 (1998): 387-401.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY SISTERS: THE TRADITION CONTINUES

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Then a rushing sound was heard in the air and twelve ravens came flying and sank downwards. And as they touched the earth they became her twelve brothers that she had lost.

And now that her mouth was opened, and she might venture to speak, she told the king the reason of her dumbness and why she had never laughed. The king rejoiced when he heard of her innocence, and they all lived together in happiness until their death.

"The Twelve Brothers"

I shall not murmur if at last  
The ones I loved below  
Permission have to understand  
For what I shunned them so--

Dickinson, #1410

During the twentieth century, literature often mirrors the wasteland of world wars, materialism, and cynicism surrounding its authors, but it also continues the tradition of courageous, loving, and resourceful heroines--the "sisters in search" of a new world of justice and harmony. Not all the creators of these characters have been familiar with Emily Dickinson, but striking parallels continue to be evident between her achievements and subsequent writers' explorations of the human quest for integrity of mind, heart, body, and soul, and the possibility of female guidance in that quest. In



the twentieth century the voices of women--and of men representing social, ethnic, or otherwise minority perspectives--eloquently testify that the human community has in some ways improved rather than deteriorated. To extend the metaphor informing this study, the sisters' silence is broken and their brothers are being transformed into their true selves.

Like Dickinson, more recent women writers and male writers from historically disadvantaged groups are often intensely interested in discovering a literary tradition in which to place themselves. Their increased opportunities for education have facilitated this process. In her 1929 classic A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf cited the well-supported argument of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch that a poor child in England has not had "a dog's chance . . . of being emancipated into that intellectual freedom of which great writings are born" (qtd. in Room 112). Woolf continues "That is it. Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. . . . Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own" (112). With those advantages, Woolf hopes, woman will learn to write better, she will learn to "speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in. . . . She will be a poet . . . in another hundred years" (98).

Although Woolf herself did not have a university education, she did have the financial means and intellectual freedom to become one of the most culturally literate women in England during her lifetime. Yet she provides a tragically ironic example of Gerda Lerner's argument that women's advancement is perennially hindered by not knowing the accomplishments of women before them. There seems to be no evidence that Woolf ever knew of Emily Dickinson's existence, although the poet did receive a few reviews in British periodicals during the 1920s. By 1930 she finally appeared in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but her reception in England was still generally cooler than in America (Lubbers 156). In Michele Barrett's invaluable collection of Woolf's essays on women and writing, only three female poets are discussed: Elizabeth Barrett Browning (133-44), Christina Rossetti (161-68), and Ella Wheeler Wilcox (173-79); of the three, Rossetti receives the most complimentary remarks. It seems unlikely that Woolf would never have mentioned Dickinson's poems had she known of them. Such an encounter might have had a considerable impact on the life and work of this most poetic of novelists--and ultimately on the entire direction of feminist theory and action during this century.

As it is, Virginia Woolf's examination of conflicting female roles in her masterpiece To the Lighthouse addresses many of the issues that preoccupied Dickinson, as we shall see. Strangely enough, the novel employs several of

the earlier writer's favorite images, such as light, the sea, and the butterfly, to convey similar reflections about art, love, death, and eternity. However, important differences between Dickinson and Woolf include their perception of the mother-figure and their relationship to religious faith.

It may seem problematic to identify Christlike female characters in the works of Woolf and several other modern writers who have not been associated with traditional religious institutions. However, this seeming difficulty becomes largely superficial in light of Thomas A. Vogler's succinct explanation:

In this period [the early twentieth century] none of the great writers were Religious, and all of them were religious. They wrote about religious problems and religion itself, they shared a "religious" feeling for the value of life, but in such a way that Religion in its conventional sense became part of that larger life that was their subject. (7)

The attitude of these creative writers, Vogler continues,

must be distinguished from the concept of "atheism" that was totally alien to it. Leslie Stephen, in his militant agnosticism, fell into a psychological dogmatism precisely like that Religion against which he was rebelling. Virginia Woolf was able to

hold the question of the existence of God in abeyance in all her work. (8)

Similarly, the present study is not focused on the question of God's existence but rather on an archetypal figure whose literary characterizations are historically grounded in the central texts of a particular religious tradition. Like Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, several other writers have selectively drawn upon that tradition in their re-creations of the sister-in-search who symbolizes the potential for a transformed community. For a cultural critic, Christianity and feminism alike may be regarded as elements among others of "that larger life" that is the "subject" of creative literature.

This cultural approach particularly illuminates the work of D. H. Lawrence, sometimes regarded as hopelessly chauvinistic. From a Nonconformist religious background similar to Dickinson's, Lawrence was likewise attracted to the cycles of the natural year and of more liturgical church traditions. As another section of this chapter will explain, the Lady of Isis in his late novella The Man Who Died is amazingly reminiscent of Dickinson's poet-prophet persona.

Although Lawrence, like Woolf, does not seem to have been familiar with Emily Dickinson, their American contemporary Thornton Wilder did know and admire the poet's works. He may have used her as one of his models for both the Marquesa de Monemayor and Madre Maria del Pilar in

The Bridge of San Luis Rey. Both characters purportedly gain considerable fame after their deaths, in the fictional history of Peru presupposed in the novel. Wilder is noteworthy for the purposes of this study in that he is the most explicitly Christian of the twentieth-century writers to be discussed here, and that he, as a male writer, could envision his feminist heroine Madre Maria in a setting some three centuries before his lifetime. In his faith and in his feminist sympathies, it seems fair to say that Wilder was in the minority among male intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, although not a minority with respect to race and economic class. In fact, his serious consideration of Christian ideals appears to have influenced his positive portrayals of women--and also contributed to disagreement over the artistic merits of his works.

Ernest Gaines's Miss Jane Pittmann is another heroine belatedly recognized for her impressive strength of character, becoming honored near the end of her very long life as a wise woman among her people. Rather like Dickinson, she is essentially the unacknowledged royalty in a world where all the ostensible leaders are white males. As an African American, Gaines represents an even more disadvantaged class of men than the miner's child D. H. Lawrence. Both are thus consistent with the historical tendency for such men to sympathize with women's struggles for equality--and with the literary image of the green world lover, discussed earlier.

Tillie Olsen's Helen and Alva, of the short story "O Yes," are among the very few mothers representing the archetype, which recalls attention to the folktale sister's conflict between family and personal mission. Emily Dickinson dealt with this perennial conflict by remaining unmarried. In a world where women's gifts are restricted, it is often difficult for mothers to be role models for their own daughters, as the Dickinson family illustrates. Despite all odds, the interracial friendship of Helen and Alva sets an encouraging example for their twelve-year-old daughters.

The difficulty of integrating one's individual quest with personal relationships is also resolved in the half-fantasy, half-real world of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Beginning Place--virtually a symbolic representation of Carolyn Heilbrun's theory of androgyny. Patriarchal stereotypes of helpless fair maidens and dark Byronic Masters are transcended in the love of Hugh and Irena. Their quest for the royal city, for the sake of the villagers who befriended them, ends--again rather like Dickinson's--in their becoming the unacknowledged royalty of the earthly city where they will live out their transformed lives.

Just as Emily Dickinson is illuminated by the tradition of Christlike women in literature, she and the writers preceding her in that tradition illuminate important elements in the work of those who come after her. The religious dimension of the archetypal sisters-in-search has profound

interdisciplinary significance for the future of women's studies. Feminist theory and action are all too often beset with the pitfalls of ahistoricity and separatism. In contrast, "Shakespeare's sister" dramatizes through her life and art the benefits of knowing one's heritage and reshaping it as necessary to build "a free temple of ungendered humanity" (Lerner 191), where there is "neither Jew nor Greek . . . neither male nor female," for all are as one (Galatians 3:28).

#### Reconsidering Mrs. Ramsay: Virginia Woolf's Vision

Ye are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.  
Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a  
candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works,  
and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Matthew 5:14-16

What was the meaning of life? . . . The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark. . . . Mrs. Ramsay saying "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)--this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability.

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse 240-41

The Poets light but Lamps--  
Themselves go out--  
The Wicks they stimulate--  
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns--  
Each Age a Lens  
Disseminating their  
Circumference

Dickinson, #882

Virginia Woolf is the pre-eminent foremother of modern feminism.

Almost a cult figure, her image is recreated and invoked in support of widely diverse feminist philosophies, much as the figure of Jesus has been variously interpreted by differing church traditions throughout history. Brilliant, witty, sensitive, and compassionate, Woolf anticipated both secular and Christian feminist thinkers of the late twentieth century with remarkable precision, and without the bitterness that sometimes underlies their arguments. In her masterpiece To the Lighthouse, she combined innovative style and intricate patterns of imagery to convey several themes as relevant today as when the novel was first published in 1927. Among these themes are the challenge of reconciling new and traditional female roles, the need for both sexes to share responsibility for human relationships, the assertion that what people do to one another is more terrible than anything done by nature or death, and the affirmation of hidden patterns beneath the surface of life.

This mystical sense of pattern is crucial to understanding Woolf's positive portrayals of women in To the Lighthouse. The novel explores the profound effects of the life and death of the beautiful matron Mrs. Ramsay upon her family and friends, most notably the unmarried artist Lily Briscoe.



Partly by placing similar images in the thoughts of separate characters at separate times, the author conveys a sense of order in the universe--in a way which would not, of course, be apparent to the characters themselves. This observation, based upon considerable internal evidence from the text, has been externally vindicated by Woolf's private memoirs, published long after her death in the collection Moments of Being. In "A Sketch of the Past," written at the age of fifty-seven, Woolf eloquently affirms,

[T]he strongest pleasure known to me . . . is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy . . . that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; . . . that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

This intuition of mine . . . is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me. . . . It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background . . . conceptions.

Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else.

All artists I suppose feel something like this. (72-73)

Throughout To the Lighthouse Woolf celebrates the "moments of being" ("Sketch" 70), the "little daily miracles" that all artists strive to capture and make "permanent" (To the Lighthouse 240). As Mrs. Ramsay makes seemingly ordinary moments into works of art, as Lily labors over her paintings and Mr. Carmichael his poems, so Woolf carefully fashioned the patterns of her novel to parallel her stubborn, intensely private, belief in an orderly universe. As she was the daughter of the famous atheist Leslie Stephen and lived her life within a circle of rationalist intellectuals, it is natural that her conscious mind censors the irrationality of her individual vision. She interrupts herself with the reminder that her father, her friends, even her husband, would have supplied, "There is no God," then rushes on to insist nonetheless that the intuition of pattern seems "given to me, not made by me." Writing, the making of patterns, may not appear rational or useful, but--like Emily Dickinson--Woolf feels it supremely necessary that she do it.

Certainly her own creative experience would have suggested that art does not spring effortlessly into being without an artist.

In Section XI of Part One of To the Lighthouse (95-100), Mrs. Ramsay has an inner conversation with herself analogous to Woolf's in "A Sketch of the Past." Mrs. Ramsay's strength is renewed by private moments of meditation in the presence of the Lighthouse. She does not want to be watched at these times, much as Lily does not like people to watch her painting. Consciously, Mrs. Ramsay rejects "the hands of the Lord" as a metaphor for the source of these moments of spiritual refreshment, yet Woolf knew well enough that the impersonal image of light is a traditional symbol for divinity. Jane Marcus notes that Woolf's Quaker aunt Caroline Stephen "left to her niece a legacy of the value of silence, inner light, and the absolute authority of one's own mystical experience," not to mention the financial legacy which helped enable the author to make the most of her talents (18). The Lighthouse may represent impersonal order in the universe, yet Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with a part of it, with the third long beam of the light. It would be hard to think of a symbol more consistent with Christian imagery. The Lighthouse is both distant and near, transcendent and immanent, a mysterious Other yet within the self as the Spirit is said to be. In Christian symbolism Christ is often called the Light of the World; his followers are called to let their lights shine through good works (Matthew

5:16). Mrs. Ramsay manifests the light so completely that it is only after her death that others make their way literally or figuratively to the Lighthouse.

In Woolf's own family (on whom the novel's characters are loosely based), Mrs. Stephen's untimely death precipitated young Virginia's first severe bout with mental illness. For several years she and her sister Vanessa were made unnecessarily miserable by Sir Leslie's oppressive grief and their Duckworth half-brothers' abusive interference in their lives. At the age of thirty, Virginia married Leonard Woolf, an agnostic Jew and political writer who cared for her throughout her repeated attacks of severe depression according to the best medical advice then available. Their relationship, although unusual in many respects, was far ahead of its time as a model for egalitarian marriage (see Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life 76-95, and Spater and Parsons, A Marriage of True Minds). In March of 1941 Woolf drowned herself in the River Ouse, fearing another onslaught of mental illness as well as the possibility of Hitler's invasion of England.

The pattern of Woolf's attacks, closely following family deaths and then frequently following the publication of her novels, is extremely relevant to the themes of To the Lighthouse. Like Lily Briscoe, Woolf constantly struggled to reconcile her roles as woman and artist. Biographer Phyllis Rose suggests that Woolf's train of reasoning began with the premise that her mother and sister Stella were loved by everyone. Committing herself to writing books

rather than raising children was not being like her mother. Therefore, after producing each work of art, she felt unlovable. Having reaffirmed her difference from her mother, she needed much reassurance of her own worth. Fortunately, as Rose explains, Leonard Woolf was very "maternal," watching over Virginia and encouraging her work (169). Significantly, the reconciliation with Mrs. Ramsay that enables Lily to complete her painting is immediately preceded by her memories of Mr. Bankes. "One could talk of painting then seriously to a man" (263). The elderly scientist knows next to nothing about art, but he has respected Lily and taken an intelligent interest in her work. Lily realizes that Mr. Bankes has in fact given her what Mrs. Ramsay continually gave to others, exhausting all her energies. In a world where the responsibility for human relationships is shared, Lily can finish her painting, and Virginia Woolf manages over and over to regain her mental balance and return to her craft.

Whatever criticisms can be made of Mrs. Ramsay, the central fact of the novel is that everyone is devastated by her death, even as desolation followed Julia Stephen's death. What such a person is and does cannot be dismissed as trivial. It would be simplistic to assume that Woolf is merely contrasting the traditional Victorian lady with the new individualistic career woman represented by Lily. Rather, Woolf implies that many qualities of the traditional Angel in the House (described in her essay "Professions for

Women" 58-60) are not inherently evil; the evil is that one person, the wife and mother, was expected to carry the exhausting burden of unselfish devotion to the needs and demands of everyone else. Woolf suggests that respect for women does not mean the consecration of an Angel in the House to do what others are too self-absorbed to do, but the cooperation of both sexes and all ages in all the tasks necessary to harmony and happiness. No one should have to be like Mrs. Ramsay--because, paradoxically, everyone should be like her, sharing the work of nurturing, caring, and peacemaking.

Although Mrs. Ramsay accepts society's expectation that she play the part of Angel in the House, that role does not come easily or naturally. Rather, it demands immense emotional and spiritual energy and by implication drains her physical health as well. She humbly believes, as Woolf does not, that what she does is woman's duty, and that what her husband and other men give to the world is more important. Yet Mrs. Ramsay's abundant love refuses to be restricted to the nurture of her immediate family and friends; she has a strong concern for social problems. We first see her knitting a stocking for the Lighthouse keeper's child. She longs to help the poor more effectively and looks forward to having more time and money to devote to an island hospital, a clean dairy, and better drains. Old Mrs. MacNab, the cleaning woman, later recalls how Mrs. Ramsay spoke kindly to her, whereas Mr. Ramsay never noticed her.

Mrs. Ramsay is presented as an artist at life, a creator of moments of beauty which remain in the memory "like a work of art" (240). Because she considers her marriage to be very happy, despite its tensions, marriage is her highest symbol for harmony in human relationships. Early in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay lovingly dispels her husband's professional self-doubts through her laugh, her poise, her competence (as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child). . . . If he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high, not for a second should he find himself without her. So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent." (60)

This passage echoes both Psalm 139 and Romans 8 and also recalls Emily Dickinson's Poem # 616: "I rose--because He sank-- / . . . I cheered my fainting Prince-- / . . . And ways I knew not that I knew--till then-- / I lifted Him--." Woolf's imagery associates Mrs. Ramsay with divinity but at the same time reveals the strain of superhuman expectations upon a very mortal woman. Like Christ, Mrs. Ramsay is courageous, loving, independent, a little stern--and never fully appreciated during her lifetime. Everyone loves her, but not enough to follow her example and care for one another, allowing her a

little rest. Lily, her chief "disciple," does reluctantly sense and obey some of her unspoken requests for help, but it is only years later that she understands that Mrs. Ramsay literally carried the burden of all their shortcomings. Sometimes Mrs. Ramsay finds it difficult to gather strength, "as a sailor, not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail, and yet hardly wants to be off again, and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea" (127). A similar sentiment is expressed in Dickinson's "Just lost when I was saved!" (#160), in which the speaker regrets having to return from the shores of Eternity, like a sailor bringing back news of "foreign shores" to those who remain behind. Woolf's metaphor, however, lacks most of the religious connotations within Dickinson's poem, almost as if foreshadowing her own death by drowning.

Images of shipwreck in dangerous seas recur frequently in Woolf's novel, as they do in Dickinson's poems, reminding the reader that a lighthouse is quite literally a survival mechanism, with its ecological niche in the universe. The Lighthouse thus is simultaneously man-made and natural, just as the making of patterns with words or paint may be seen as a natural human activity. Dickinson observes in #883 that "The Poets light but Lamps--" although "Themselves--go out--." In #259 she laments the putting out of a candle that "might--have been the Light House spark-- /



Some Sailor--rowing in the Dark-- / Had importuned to see!" For both writers, light is a symbol of hope amid the storms of life.

Again, in #598 ("Three times--we parted--Breath and I--") the poet describes the experience of drowning, but concludes with "Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis-- / And I stood up and lived--," incorporating the image of the butterfly which is repeatedly employed in her poems and in To the Lighthouse. In #1685 Dickinson playfully observes that "the circumspect are certain" that the butterfly is a dissolute creature because he travels freely and wears a beautiful coat; if he made himself useful through "modest Industry," he might appear a more fitting symbol "For Immortality." She may be figuratively saying that artists receive similar criticism from practical people of the world. Similarly, Woolf uses the butterfly to represent the beauty of art; Lily imagines the colors of her picture "burning on a framework of steel, the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (75). When she returns to her painting in Part III, the same image appears: "Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing, but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron" (255). When Tansley, the male character most hostile to women, is annoyed by Mrs. Ramsay's friendly questions, he "raised a hammer, swung it high into the air;" but realizes "that he could not smite that butterfly with such an

instrument" (138). It is at this moment Lily senses Mrs. Ramsay's unspoken plea that she draw Tansley into conversation and nourish his badly starved ego. At the same time she suddenly thinks of a change that will improve the picture on which she has been working (an abstract rendering of Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son James). Lily's ability to imitate her hostess exists in a symbiotic relationship to her ability to solve the problems of her painting.

Even though Lily is sometimes amused or irritated by Mrs. Ramsay, she believes the older woman possesses some secret wisdom which "people must have for the world to go on at all" (78). When Lily finally finishes her painting, she has incorporated the very real virtues of the woman of the past, yet not to such an extent that she sacrifices her own vocation or relieves others from learning the art of life. She stumbles upon the mystery of following Mrs. Ramsay's example in this new way through her unpremeditated compliment upon Mr. Ramsay's boots, which does him more good than any amount of direct sympathy. Only through focusing attention away from himself and his own feelings is Mr. Ramsay enabled to praise his son and metaphorically set his daughter free.

Cam, like Virginia Stephen in real life, is closer to her father than is her younger brother, but she loyally sides with James against the tyranny of their father's emotional demands. When Mr. Ramsay finally praises James

for skillfully rowing their boat to the Lighthouse, Cam is silent but exultant with relief to be free at last of her mother's role as peacemaker. At the same moment Lily finishes her painting, saying to herself, "I have had my vision" (310). Even if the painting might one day be relegated by others to the attic or dustbin, what matters most is that it successfully represents her vision. Perhaps Emily Dickinson felt much the same as she wrote and rewrote the multitude of poems she left lying in her drawer. Lily's picture, literally a representation of Mrs. Ramsay, becomes a symbol of all that women might do in a world where men share the task of nurturing human relationships. The novel itself expresses Woolf's personal sense of release as she laid the ghosts of her parents to rest and affirmed her adult identity as a writer (see "A Sketch of the Past" 81).

Woolf's choice of a painter instead of a writer as the representative woman who accomplishes her quest constitutes an interesting variation of the "silent sister" metaphor. Jane Goldman's analysis of the importance of silence in To the Lighthouse is a helpful foundation for this interpretation (167), even though Goldman does not see Lily as preserving Mrs. Ramsay's values in some sense, in addition to challenging them (119). Mrs. Ramsay considers herself relatively inarticulate, yet her silent presence often has extraordinary impact on others. The silent communication between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay at the end of Part I is a brilliant rendering of unspoken

intimacy between a man and a woman, different though they may be. Goldman rightly emphasizes the feminist dimension of Lily's "silent resistance" to Mr. Ramsay's implicit demands for sympathy (178-79). However, it seems significant, as already noted, that Lily's silence is not entirely literal. Instead of pouring out sentimental consolation, she in fact restores Mr. Ramsay to a more positive mood by her compliment upon his boots. Goldman also points out the "silent resistance" of Cam and James to Mr. Ramsay's emotional domination (179). Again, when Mr. Ramsay praises James for his rowing, Cam silently communicates her empathy with her brother's pleasure and her relief from the tension of conflicting loyalties to father and brother. Then, as Lily prepares to complete her picture, she feels a "silent affinity" with the old poet Mr. Carmichael (Goldman 183). Like the folktale of the sister and her twelve brothers, To the Lighthouse is a verbal tribute to the transformative power of silence.

Many elements of the Demeter/Persephone myth also enrich the complexity of To the Lighthouse; for example, Joseph Blotner notes that Mrs. Ramsay is referred to as a goddess and a queen and is associated with fruits and flowers like Demeter, the goddess of all growing things (176). Mrs. Ramsay fears the sorrows life will bring to her children and wishes she could keep Cam and James young forever, much as Demeter grieves over Persephone's maturity and abduction. Yet, as Persephone found the King of

Death less terrible than he seemed at first, Woolf describes "night flowing down in purple, his head crowned; his sceptre jewelled; and how in his eyes a child might look" (213). The effects of nature and death, although unsparingly portrayed in "Time Passes" (Part II of the novel), are less destructive than the sins of human beings, Woolf implies. "This was tragedy," Lily Briscoe grimly thinks as she observes Mr. Ramsay's grief-stricken demands for sympathy and obedience, "not palls, dust, and the shroud, but children coerced, their spirits subdued" (222).

Lily explicitly imagines Mrs. Ramsay's death with allusions to Persephone. She pictures her letting her flowers fall from her basket and going away with the figure of Death "without question or complaint--had she not the faculty of obedience to perfection?" (299). Woolf's personifications of night and death strikingly resemble Emily Dickinson's calm portrayal of Death as an inexorable gentleman caller--as in "Because I could not stop for Death" (#712). A few moments later, Lily seems to see Mrs. Ramsay sitting once more in the window and casting her shadow on the step. As Persephone returns each spring, as Christ figuratively returns from the grave upon Easter, the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay has in some sense returned. It is in the very next section that Mr. Ramsay achieves the moment of reconciliation with his children, and Lily completes her painting.

Any connections with the myth of Demeter and Persephone serve to reinforce the even stronger parallels between To the Lighthouse and Shakespeare's most feminist play, The Winter's Tale, discussed in Chapter Two of this study. The two works have similar chronological structures, with a long period of years interrupting the action midway through. In each case there is an important trio of female figures. Like Hermione, Mrs. Ramsay is beloved by almost everyone, yet not clearly seen by her husband for what she is. The disappearance of each woman has a profound impact upon other characters. Lily loves Mrs. Ramsay as Paulina loves Hermione, but--like Paulina--she seems somewhat more independent and more outspoken about male faults than is her friend. By some means left ambiguous, Paulina preserves or restores the Queen, as Lily through the magic of art and through her words to Mr. Ramsay immortalizes the essence of Mrs. Ramsay's character. Mr. Ramsay unknowingly alienates himself from his son through his excessive demands on Mrs. Ramsay, just as Leontes loses his son through abusing his patriarchal powers and unjustly victimizing his Queen.

Similarly, Perdita, like the lost Persephone, is separated from her mother because all is not right between her mother and the more powerful male figures of authority. Likewise, Cam and her older sisters are psychologically separated from their mother because they long for the adventures and opportunities that have been denied to women but that now

seem tantalizingly within reach at this point in Western history. They are inclined to "blame" their mother for playing the Angel in the House, not yet realizing (as Lily does) the complex social obstacles women have yet to overcome. Perdita and Cam are both reunited, literally or metaphorically, with their parents when the fathers begin to take some responsibility for human relationships. It is through Perdita, the once-rejected daughter, that Leontes' family line will continue. Analogously, it is through Cam's counterpart Virginia Woolf that the entire Stephen family is most remembered--just as the distinguished Dickinson family is most remembered through its gifted daughter.

As with Dickinson, we may never unravel all the interconnections between Woolf's art and the myths and literature of Western culture in which her mind was steeped. We do know that she expressed ironic sympathy for all those who must hear the Bible read out in bits and pieces on Sunday mornings, "yet those who have not been forced from childhood to hear it thus dismembered weekly assert that the Bible is a work of the greatest interest, much beauty, and deep meaning" (Three Guineas 180, n. 29). Leslie Stephen's daughter might hesitate to affirm the divinity of Christ--or indeed the existence of any divinity--in conventional terms, but she thought it patently plain to any reader of the Gospels that Jesus regarded men and women equally and demanded neither masculinity nor professional training

of his followers. (The latter point reflects Woolf's lifelong regret that she lacked a university education). In a few pages of her incisive nonfiction volume Three Guineas, she summarized the biblical affirmations of women, deplored the institutional Church's departure from the clear example of its founder as it raised barriers to the leadership of women, and shrewdly analyzed the psychological and sociological reasons behind objections to women's ordination or entrance to other professions (121-44). Apparently through reading the Bible and other creative literature, Woolf independently discovered much that Christian feminists now reformulate and share openly in journals, conferences, and university courses--often without knowing their arguments were thus anticipated some fifty years earlier. Had she survived World War II, the subsequent history of the feminist movement might have been very different. Consider, for example, how the vision of an older Virginia Woolf might have balanced the perspective of de Beauvoir's The Second Sex or Millett's Sexual Politics. Jane Marcus goes so far as to affirm, "Virginia Woolf was both an artist and a saint. The moral vision she gives in her novels is that of a rational mystic who calls for human community from her cloistered imagination" (31).

Through poetic fiction and eloquent nonfiction, Woolf delineates the difficulties besetting women brave enough to seek both integrity and community, family and vocation; she also envisions the possibility of



forgiveness and reconciliation between men and women. She suggests that art exists, not for art's sake, but for the rapture of the writer, the delight of the reader, and the communication of eternal reality (A Room of One's Own 114). Like the Lighthouse, art might be described as a survival mechanism.

### The Physician's Healer: Lawrence's Lady of Isis

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 1:27

"Great is Isis!" he said. "In her search she is greater than death."

D. H. Lawrence, The Man Who Died, Part II

To wait an Hour--is long--  
If Love be just beyond--  
To wait Eternity--is short--  
If Love reward the end--

Dickinson, #781

D. H. Lawrence was a man of humble birth with few of the privileges and powers commonly associated with the patriarchal establishment; the same is true of Jesus, as illustrated in Chapter One of this study. His courageous nonconformity reached its height in his last novella, The Man Who Died, an extraordinary parable of physical and spiritual resurrection. The man who had died, as the protagonist is always called, has at least as much in common with the all-too-human dying author as with the Jesus of

the Gospels, whose circumstances he shares. It is the Lady of Isis who is the true Christ-figure of the tale, for she heals the suffering man who had died and has the strength and endurance to outlast the forces of evil.

In The Man Who Died, Lawrence anticipates several central themes of feminist spirituality: the recognition of the divine image as androgynous, the celebration of the body and of all nature, and the search for human relationships rather than power and prestige. Although Lawrence, like many feminists, rejected institutional Christianity for failing to promote these ideals, we have seen that Christian feminists have found precedents for these principles in the Bible and in certain branches of the early church. Nevertheless, The Man Who Died certainly contributes to Lawrence's controversial reputation.

E. M. Forster considered Lawrence a great prophetic artist (143-44); Mark Spilka affirms that "Lawrence was a religious artist, . . . and that all his work was governed by religious ends" (3). Significantly, Lawrence regarded the sacrament of marriage as one of Christianity's greatest contributions to Western culture ("A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover" 98). In fact, Diana Trilling observes that he is literally puritanical by modern standards in his defense of committed monogamous relationships (4). However the language and situations in some of his works have provoked the wrath of conservative elements in society as well as of some noted feminists.

Simone de Beauvoir sharply criticizes Lawrence in The Second Sex, but focuses heavily on Fantasia of the Unconscious and The Plumed Serpent (242-52). neither of which have been regarded as among his better works of art. Kate Millett's influential Sexual Politics also sees Lawrence as a prime example of sexism, but never mentions The Man Who Died. Thus, neither does justice to the development of Lawrence's thought during the course of his career, culminating in his vision of the Lady of Isis.

More recent feminist critics have arrived at a more balanced assessment of Lawrence's place in literary history. As the most cursory study of Lawrence's biography reveals, he is one of those writers whose art is intimately influenced by his life. Born in 1885 to an uneducated miner and a middle-class ambitious mother, the young Lawrence was very close to his mother and sister. Anne Smith points out that there was no man in his environment with whom such an artistic and sensitive youth could identify (13). In 1912 he embarked upon the somewhat tempestuous relationship that lasted the rest of his life. Lawrence fell in love with Frieda von Richthofen Weekley, wife of a professor at Nottingham University, eloping with her to the Continent and marrying her two years later. Some of his best novels and poems were written during this period. Frieda's ex-husband at first refused to let Frieda see their children, but one of the daughters, Barbara Weekley Barr, frequently visited the Lawrences during her young adulthood and

recorded a delightful comment that testifies against the view of Lawrence as a male chauvinist. She remembered that he was not dependent on women in his daily life, "but could mend, cook, and find his own possessions" (27). Like Paul Morel of Sons and Lovers, Lawrence had helped his mother in his youth and had better domestic skills than the upper-class Frieda. In short, as Carole Siegel maintains, "Lawrence was marginal to the world of men because of his class, his habits, his preoccupations, even his personality" (50). Siegel's excellent study, Lawrence Among the Women, examines the extensive influence of women writers--particularly the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, and Olive Schreiner--upon Lawrence's art. His heroines, like theirs, are usually seeking a more fulfilling life than is readily available to women in their society (55).

The horrors of World War I, as well as his failing health, contributed to the disillusionment and impatience with humanity which adversely affected Lawrence's art during the early 1920s. In her essay "Women and Fiction," Virginia Woolf astutely analyzed the aesthetic pitfall confronting women writers and men like Lawrence:

In Middlemarch and in Jane Eyre we are conscious not merely of the writer's character . . . but we are conscious of a woman's presence--of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights.

This brings into women's writing an element which is entirely absent from a man's, unless, indeed, he happens to be a working-man, a Negro, or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability. It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness. The desire to plead some personal cause or to make a character the mouthpiece of some personal discontent or grievance always has a distressing effect.

(47)

Although Woolf was not specifically referring to Lawrence in this passage, her remarks seem applicable to The Plumed Serpent and many short stories of the same period, in which Lawrence's views tended to overwhelm his art rather than enrich it. This tendency is much reduced, although sometimes still evident, in his last novels. Even though his health continued to decline, Lawrence gradually found some measure of peace with himself and the world, reflected in his final works. Siegel notes that within a year after Lawrence's death, Virginia Woolf took time to read Sons and Lovers, The Man Who Died, and Huxley's edition of Lawrence's letters, subsequently concluding that he had much in common with herself and other women writers, for he too was an outsider to the dominant male literary tradition (91-93).

Still another example of Lawrence's affinity with women writers is the remarkable resemblance between his *Lady of Isis* and Emily Dickinson's prophet-persona--even though it seems likely that he never encountered the poet's works. No reference to Dickinson has been unearthed in Siegel's study focusing on Lawrence's affinities with women writers, or in Rose Marie Burwell's exhaustive catalog of Lawrence's reading (59-125), though he did know of Alcott, Stowe, Cather, and various other American women writers.<sup>2</sup> At first glance it might seem that Lawrence would have been highly unimpressed with the Amherst poet, yet his *Lady of Isis* is an independent-minded individual as dedicated to her spiritual search as Dickinson was to her art. The young priestess seems to become the incarnation of Isis in *Search*--the goddess who seeks and heals the fragmented body of her brother-husband Osiris--just as the man who had died is the incarnation of the divine in Christian myth. Like Dickinson, Lawrence frequently identifies with the suffering human side of Christ, often painting Christ to resemble himself, with the same thin face and dark pointed beard as the man who had died. As Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* ironically says of Tom Robinson that he had "the unmitigated temerity to feel sorry for a white woman" (Lee 187), Lawrence has the "unmitigated temerity" to feel sorry for the Jesus of the Gospels--and, moreover, to imagine a female savior-figure for him.

The man who had died awakens in a chill tomb outside the city of Jerusalem, unbearably disillusioned even as Lawrence was disillusioned by the colossal insanity of World War II and his losing battle with tuberculosis. The man returns to physical life with the greatest reluctance. What is there in the world for him? He was killed by evil forces that are still alive and active, ready to destroy him again if they could. In great need of healing for himself, he decides to become a physician, for he still feels some compassion for humanity's suffering.

As he walks down the road, he chances to catch a peasant's escaped rooster and in return is given hospitality. The young rooster is a central symbol of the story, splendid, lively, watchful, constricted by the string on his leg but unbroken in spirit. He simultaneously represents both independence and sexuality, for which the man who had died is not yet ready; Lawrence's original title for Part I of the novella was in fact The Escaped Cock. The man still feels constricted by the demands and expectations of men and women, including the implicit invitations from the peasant's wife and from his former follower Madeleine. Although he at first catches the cock for its owner, he later purchases it and releases it in another henyard, even as his own repressed physical and emotional self needs release and renewal. The man feels the beginning of healing in the warmth of the spring sun and the

softness of the new grass beneath his feet, but he shrinks from human relationships. He does not want to lead or follow any more.

By January the wandering physician comes upon an island where the young priestess of Isis dwells. When he first arrives, he sees two young slaves from a distance, dressing pigeons for the evening meal. Suddenly one of the pigeons escapes, like but unlike the escaped cock, for it soars away into freedom. The male slave cries out in anger, beating his companion for letting the bird escape, then sexually possessing her. This violent furtive encounter, as Spilka says, is a foil for the healing union of the stranger and the priestess (227). Furthermore, the escape of the pigeon may represent the priestess' spiritual and physical independence, paralleling the analogy between the young cock and the man who died. Lawrence conflates two traditions here. In Christian symbolism the dove stands for the Holy Spirit, which is sometimes portrayed as female, while in Greek mythology doves are associated with the goddess of love. The flight of the pigeon could hardly be a better metaphor for the triumph of the Spirit of love over violence and death.

Consistent with this interpretation, we learn that when the priestess was a young girl in the world, her father's friend Mark Antony tried to court her affections, saying that he had sacrificed two doves to Venus in her behalf. But this young woman resists "the golden brief day-suns of show such as Anthony" (189). Throughout the passage, Lawrence uses the same flower-



sun imagery employed by Emily Dickinson in her much-cited Letter 93 to Susan Gilbert, in which she pities women who wilt like flowers before the "burning . . . man of noon." An old philosopher tells the woman of Lawrence's story that "Rare women wait for the re-born man. For the lotus, as you know, will not answer to all the bright heat of the sun." Rather, it opens for "the flooding, violet-dark sun that has died and risen and makes no show" (189). Accordingly, the maiden dedicates herself to the mystery of Isis in Search, for "she was a woman to herself, she would not give herself for a surface glow, nor marry for reasons" (190). One recalls Lavinia Dickinson's often-cited remark that "[Emily] was always watching for the rewarding person to come" (qtd. in Bingham 413).

Like the sister who kept silence for seven years to save her brothers, the priestess has served Isis for seven years when the man who had died comes to her land. His salutation to her goddess seems a foreshadowing of his healing. "Great is Isis!" he exclaims. "In her search she is stronger than death!" (195). The young priestess believes the man to be Osiris. At first he hesitates, but finally responds, "If you will." Instead of defining the woman, he is named by her. Instead of being the savior-healer, he surrenders himself to being healed. In deliberate revision of the Pieta theme that recurs throughout Lawrence's writing and painting, this woman is anointing the man, not to prepare for his burial, but to restore him to new life. Only after

she ceases her gentle ministrations does he approach her with passionate tenderness. Lawrence makes very clear that their sexual union is the result, not the cause, of his healing.

The priestess is described with natural images--a rose, a lotus, a narcissus, a crocus, and a rock. In her is the evanescent beauty of flowers and a hard eternal mystery. The rose, of course, is one of Dickinson's favorite metaphors for the female principle, and it is obviously characteristic of a rose to remain in one place awaiting the arrival or return of the bee or bird that represents her lover. For example, in #1339, "A Bee his burnished Carriage / Drove boldly to a rose," who "received his visit / With frank tranquillity" but must accept his imminent departure. In the famous "Come slowly--Eden!" (#211), however, it is noteworthy that the speaker identifies with the bee rather than the flower, just as we have seen Dickinson's delight in identifying with both halves of her host-guest metaphors. The Lady of Isis is almost an incarnation of Dickinson's "Soul" that stands "ajar" awaiting her guest (#1055), or who "selects her own society" (#303).

As for the metaphor of a rock, Lawrence is revising Christ's words to Peter, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). The man who had died sees the priestess as the rock on whom his renewed life is built. Virginia Hyde points out that the rock is also a traditional symbol for Christ (220). Thus, Lawrence seems to

be applying a traditionally masculine metaphor to the Lady of Isis. On the other hand, another familiar metaphor describes the Church as the bride of Christ.

In the mythic mode of this tale, the brief acquaintance of the two characters before their union is an acceptable convention of romantic storytelling, as it is in "The Twelve Brothers," "Sleeping Beauty," or "Snow White." We are meant to see that the man who died has found wholeness in finding his equal, his complement who comes to him "from the opposite end of the night" (206), bringing warmth and new life to his chilled being. Similarly, the man's departure does not have the questionable implications that it might have in a realistic novel. Rather, it echoes the two original stories in which Christ ascends to heaven and Osiris becomes ruler of the dead while Isis remains as the deity more immediately involved with human life on earth. It is after the priestess conceives a child that the man realizes his danger from her mother and the slaves and prepares to depart, promising to return again, "as sure as Spring" (210). The woman is quietly confident she can withstand the forces of evil in her land, even though the man must leave for a season. One recalls that in the Egyptian myth, Isis herself is never harmed by the wicked Set. The priestess will deal with her mother's reaction; she fears no harm from the slaves; she plans no revenge for the plots against her beloved. Her calm certainty baffles the man, even as the

orthodox Christian story was a mystery to the author, yet Lawrence was willing to portray this inexplicable faith in the face of evil as a reality of human experience. Like Emily Dickinson's prophet-persona, the priestess seems obliged to dwell more in anticipation and aftermath than in a state of fulfillment. Patient as the silent sister, both poet and priestess make a fine art of the ability to wait in readiness.

When the man who had died prepares to leave the island, he speaks out of the darkness to frighten the slave he had seen upon his arrival: "Art thou not that slave who possessed the maiden under the eyes of Isis? Art thou not the youth? Speak!" (211). At this unexpected reprimand for his abuse of a woman equally made in the divine image, the guilty youth flees in terror, leaving his boat as a means of escape for the man who had died. Thus, the next phase of existence for the man begins with the speaking out against injustice.

Lawrence elaborates this theme of The Man Who Died in an eloquent essay, "The Risen Lord," which Keith Sagar rightly calls almost an outline for a third part of the story" (322):

If Jesus rose a full man in the flesh, He rose to continue  
 His fight with the hard-boiled conventionalists like Roman  
 judges and Jewish priests and money-makers of every sort.  
 But this time, it would no longer be the fight of self-

sacrifice that would end in crucifixion. This time it would be a freed man fighting to shelter the rose of life from being trampled on by the pigs. This time, if Satan attempted temptation in the wilderness, the Risen Lord would answer: Satan, your silly temptations no longer tempt me. . . . What are riches, and glory, and honour, and might, and power, to me who have died and lost my self-importance? That's why I am going to take them all from you, Mammon, because I care nothing about them. I am going to destroy all your values, Mammon, all your money values and conceit values, I am going to destroy them all. Because only life is lovely, and you Mammon, prevent life.

(575-76)

This emphasis on the image of the Risen Lord rather than on Christ crucified is in precise harmony with the Christus Victor model of salvation, now being reclaimed by liberationist theology (as mentioned in the previous chapter of this study).

Critic Charles Rossman sums up the uniqueness of the Lady of Isis in Lawrence's work:

[T]he priestess is the only woman in Lawrence's fiction who requires no teaching, indoctrination, nor even an internally

motivated change. Quite simply, she possesses an evolved being from the beginning. . . . She recognizes a kindred spirit: his reverence for Isis, his calm, powerful stillness, his candor, his air of mystery. . . . Later at the temple of Isis, the man who died again shows his great capacity for reverence, awe, and understanding. . . . Their union is the most nearly perfect realization of the reciprocal relationship between man and woman which Lawrence strove to define and achieve in most of his major fiction: "star-equilibrium" without the taint of bullying; impersonality without the inhuman coldness; deep satisfaction taken from the body of another without reducing her or him to object or instrument. The manly mission is abandoned, the hostility toward women--terrible and deep as it was--dissipated, or more accurately, outgrown. . . . (322-23)

Clearly the dying Lawrence knew he had not found literal Paradise in the love of his adulterous wife, yet he made the love of man and woman his metaphor for the divine love stronger than all evil. Like many feminists, Lawrence had little reason to cast God in the image of Father; his father was uneducated, alcoholic, sometimes violent, and unable to understand his son's temperament and talents. Instead Lawrence chooses the image of the ideal bride to represent the wise, constant, all-loving side of God that welcomes

and restores all who have been destroyed and fragmented. Lawrence anticipates feminist theologians by implying that if humanity is created in the divine image, the Godhead must contain both male and female. He suggests in The Man Who Died that the masculine dying-hero image of God is inadequate by itself. Either the Christian concept of divinity must include male and female within it, or it is open to the charges of inadequacy and sexism that it has received from many feminists. In a much earlier novel, The Rainbow, Lawrence has Tom Brangwen say that there is no marriage in heaven because a man and a woman together make one Angel (134-35). In The Man Who Died, he indicates that man and woman together make up the complete image of God. It is remarkable that a man frequently accused of male chauvinism explored this train of thought some fifty years before the development of contemporary feminist theology.

In addition to representing the feminine face of God, the Lady of Isis might alternatively be interpreted as the Church, as suggested earlier, in which case her remaining on the island awaiting the man's return again makes excellent metaphorical sense. Secure in her love, she will outlast the indifference and hostility surrounding her. Her child represents all the Church's children, whose task it is to carry on the struggle against Mammon in all its forms. The man who died appropriately meets the priestess in January, during the liturgical season of Epiphany, when the manifestation of

Christ to the Gentiles is celebrated. Nine months have passed since the man's resurrection in the spring, and he is at last ready to be reborn into relationships with others. In January, Christ's baptism is also celebrated, when the Spirit descended in the form of a dove, empowering Jesus to begin his public ministry. Nine months after January is September, Lawrence's birth-month, with which he also associated his approaching death in the superb poem "Bavarian Gentians." In this cycle of allusions, death becomes synonymous with new birth. Perhaps in his own way Lawrence had begun to identify himself as a child of God.

As Mark Spilka says, if the Risen Christ is Lord of Life, the Church which preaches him must be the Church of Life (230). Lawrence calls the children of this Church to value femaleness as well as maleness, to value the beauty of the physical world, and to reject power-hungry authoritarianism. These modifications of conventional Christianity are precisely the distinctive elements of early Celtic Christianity. Julian Moynihan has already noted Lawrence's affinity with Celtic tradition, insofar as he was consciously familiar with it (122-35). These three elements are also the three characteristics of Jesus listed by Leonard Swidler as having been rapidly forgotten by the early Church (as explained in Chapter One of this study). It must be reiterated that in the evangelical tradition in which Lawrence--and Dickinson--were raised, the ultimate authority is not the institutional



church, but Scripture. In this tradition, Christianity is not necessarily defined by historical precedent, as Graham Hough evidently does not realize when writing of Lawrence's "abandonment of Christianity" (111). In theory, at least, the creative artist can thus claim as much authority to reinterpret texts as any ecclesiastical official. Both Dickinson and Lawrence claimed this authority, to the lasting enrichment of their readers.

### Madre Maria: The Evidence of Divine Design

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.

Matt. 10:29-31

"Now learn," she commanded herself, "learn at last that anywhere you may expect grace." And she was filled with happiness like a girl at this new proof that the traits she lived for were everywhere, that the world was ready.

Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Part V, 146

How brittle are the Piers  
On which our Faith doth tread--  
No Bridge below doth totter so--  
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God--  
Indeed--'twas built by him--  
He sent his Son to test the Plank,  
And he pronounced it firm.

Dickinson, #1433

In Thornton Wilder's best known novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, the Abbess Madre Maria del Pilar has "fallen in love with an idea several centuries before its appointed appearance in the history of civilization" (34). That is, she represents the reality of Christian feminism in history, long before that perspective had received its name. Amid the corruption of eighteenth-century Lima, Peru, she devotes herself to social reforms, helping the poor, establishing hospitals and orphanages, and particularly striving "to attach a little dignity to women" (34). Her life is interwoven with the stories of five persons who died in the fall of the great bridge of San Luis Rey, and with the lives of their survivors. Whereas Brother Juniper (witness of the accident) vainly tries to prove God's design in the fall of the bridge, Wilder implies that Madre Maria's character provides far clearer evidence of God at work in the world.

A Pulitzer Prize winner in 1927, The Bridge deserves more critical attention than it has received. Its style is simple, clear, understated, concise, yet poetic. Far from being conventionally pious and sentimental, the narrator's voice is compassionately ironic, especially toward Brother Juniper. The prologue, "Perhaps an Accident," traces the Franciscan's six-year effort to collect information about the five victims. He sees the fall of the great bridge as the perfect case study allowing one to "surprise" God's "intentions in a pure state" (7). Ironically, he does not expect of his native converts the kind

of faith he himself has. He hopes to prove to them, through meticulous collection of data concerning the five who died, "why God had settled upon that person and upon that day for his demonstration of wisdom" (8). As Mary Ellen Williams observes, Brother Juniper's study is a parody of both orthodox science and orthodox religion (35).

Wilder, in a 1953 interview, stated that he was a practicing Christian but that as a writer his "only duty" was to ask the right questions: "It is not the task of literature to answer the questions, but only a religious person will ask the question correctly" (qtd. in Wagner 59). Although Brother Juniper is sincerely religious, his fault is precisely that of asking the wrong question: Was the fall of the bridge an accident, or was it caused by God? Through the omniscient narrator, Wilder suggests that it is impossible to discover God's purposes by gathering facts to justify the fall of the bridge.

The narrator slowly undermines Brother Juniper's entire approach, after first presenting an ostensibly straightforward description of his two alternatives, expressed through two significant allusions: "Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God" (9). The first allusion recalls Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport." Ironically,

these words are spoken by the blinded Gloucester, suffering for his figurative blindness in misjudging his sons. It seems unlikely that Wilder meant to recall Gloucester as a reliable source of wisdom. The second allusion echoes Jesus' words in Matthew 10:29: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father. Fear not then, for you are of more value than many sparrows." The Revised English Bible has clarified the crucial sentence to read "without your Father's knowledge," which seems consistent with Luke's phrasing in the King James Version: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" (Luke 12:7). The remainder of the novel suggests that the belief that God knows and cares about the fall of the sparrow or the fall of the bridge does not necessarily mean "the finger of God" caused these events to happen. This third alternative is what Brother Juniper fails to understand. Presumably the bridge falls because its structure has weakened slowly and imperceptibly until the combined weight of the travelers is sufficient to make it collapse. As Madre Maria joyfully comes to recognize, God's intervention with humanity is revealed in other ways, through the reactions and interactions of those bereaved by the fall of the bridge.

Here it should be recalled that the theme of bereavement and the images of the sparrow and the bridge are significant elements in Dickinson's poetry. In a 1952 essay published in the Atlantic Monthly, Wilder revealed a

real appreciation of the earlier writer's gifts. Although he indulged in some questionable psychoanalyzing of Dickinson's personality, he also saw her as a "genius" who "was charged with extraordinary resources of the life-force which could break through dams and repair ravage" ("Emily Dickinson" 53). Borrowing a phrase from her Poem #406, he identified her as one of those who "work for Immortality." Nevertheless, he may also have known her forthright challenges to the Deity in Poems #141 and #690. In the former, she describes those who die early as "Sparrows unnoticed by the Father," while the latter concludes, "God keep His Oath to Sparrows-- / Who of little Love--know how to starve--." Of course, both writers would have known that Gloucester's bitter lament in King Lear is counterbalanced by Hamlet's conclusion: "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. . . . The readiness is all" (5.2.216-17, 220). Similarly, as we shall see, the faith expressed through Dickinson's bridge metaphors transcends the mood of her much earlier sparrow allusions--and Wilder likewise imagines faith as a bridge between the visible and invisible worlds.

As James Blake points out, whereas Brother Juniper hopes to understand the five who died by examining multitudes of facts, the narrator analyzes them in light of the love they give and receive (19). For example, Dona Maria, the Marquesa de Montemayor, defines herself as the neglected mother of a beautiful and accomplished daughter, Dona Clara, to whom she

writes magnificent letters now purported to be among the great Spanish classics. Wilder loosely based this eccentric genius of a letter-writer upon the Frenchwoman Madame de Sevigne (1626-1696), who poured out her passionate love for her daughter in epistles that have in fact held a respected place in literary history (see Wilder, "On Reading the Great Letter Writers" 155-57). Furthermore, Wilder's description of Mme. de Sevigne's saintly grandmother Marie de Chantal (co-worker of St. Francis de Sales) suggests that he had her in mind as a model for the Abbess in his novel. The character of Madre Maria seems also reminiscent of Sor Juana de la Cruz, the great writer and defender of women in colonial Mexico (1648-1695). In any case, the existence of these historical figures indicates that Wilder's characterization is fully within the bounds of realism. Those who think feminism a recent movement incompatible with Christianity have but to read the work of Sor Juana de la Cruz or Wilder's description of Madre Maria del Pilar:

She hurled herself against the obstinacy of her time in her desire to attach a little dignity to women. At midnight when she had finished adding up the accounts of the House she would fall into insane visions of an age when women could be organized to protect women, women travelling, women as servants, women when

they were old or ill, the women she had discovered in the mines of Potosi, or in the workrooms of the cloth-merchants, the girls she had collected out of doorways on rainy nights. . . . Twenty such women would have failed to make any impression on that age. Yet she continued diligently in her task. . . . Her plain red face had great kindness, and more idealism than kindness, and more generalship than idealism. (34-35)

Madre Maria has no time to spare from her tireless labors to manufacture intellectual proofs of God's intervention in human affairs. She herself embodies that intervention. Significantly, she is contrasted not only with Brother Juniper, but also with her superior in the Church, from whom she struggles to obtain financial support for her work. "The Archbishop of Lima . . . hated her . . . and counted the cessation of her visits among the compensations for dying" (35). With each of his brief appearances in the novel, the Archbishop makes an increasingly negative impression. He is fat and ineffectual, continually indulging in rich food, elegant company, and libertine reading. Knowing that most of his priests in Peru are corrupt, he tells himself injustice is inevitable and the poor do not really suffer. One can see why the Abbess has difficulty in persuading him to support her work.

It should be apparent that both Madre Maria and the Marquesa have affinities with Emily Dickinson, the one because of her strong sense of vocation and the other in her private refinement of her literary gifts. Like the Amherst poet, both characters purportedly become more famous after their deaths than they had been in life, for they rise above personal sorrows to create constructive legacies that outlast their mortal existence.

Because she wishes her intended successor Pepita to gain broader experience of the world outside the convent, the Abbess sends the girl to be Dona Maria's companion. To Pepita, the Abbess is almost perfection, as Mrs. Ramsay is to her daughters Prue and Rose. However, the lonely girl fulfills her duties to her new mistress with remarkable thoroughness and loyalty. At last Pepita breaks down and writes a poignant letter pleading for a message or brief visit from the Abbess. Yet after her mistress has accidentally seen the note, Pepita gathers her courage and decides against sending it: "It wasn't . . . it wasn't . . . brave" (47). Dona Maria is amazed and humbled by the example of her young companion. She sees her possessive love for her daughter in a new light and writes a final letter to Dona Clara expressing a more free and generous love, a letter which supposedly has become one of her most famous literary gems. In psychological terms, Dona Maria might be said to have taken responsibility for her own emotional well-being and ceased to make love an addiction rather than a gift. Thus both the Marquesa and



Pepita have shown great courage and begun life anew, just before their lives are lost in the fall of the bridge.

Another victim of the great accident was the young man Esteban. The twins Manuel and Esteban had also been orphans under the care of Madre Maria del Pilar. Although she had lost patience with most men, she found herself growing fond of these serious silent boys. When Manuel unexpectedly dies of an infected knee injury, Esteban is devastated, utterly unable to accept this terrible reality. After Madre Maria unsuccessfully tries to comfort him, she storms at God in honest anger, but then finds the humility to send for Captain Alvarado, one of the boys' former employers, who may be able to reach Esteban although she cannot. In this action she rises above her prejudices against men, who seem to have "made hideous the world she worked in" (54). Captain Alvarado manages to persuade Esteban to go away with him and save some earnings to buy a gift for the Abbess, who had spoken of her own experience of suffering. Ironically, Esteban remarks, "Women can't bear that kind of a thing like we can" (82), although he is on the verge of suicide, and the Abbess is presented as extremely courageous. His fall with the bridge appears almost as a merciful release.

Still another character who dies in the accident is Uncle Pio, a shrewd resourceful individual of many talents who for many years has been the guardian and teacher of the famous actress Camila (also known as the

Perichole). Eventually the self-centered young woman disappoints Uncle Pio by abandoning her career to become the Viceroy's mistress. After she falls into near-insane despair because she is stricken with smallpox, he with great difficulty gains an audience with her and persuades her to let him take her son Don Jaime back to Lima and tutor him for a year. The small boy, who suffers from convulsions, is nonetheless willing to venture into the unknown world. Thus both of them, like the other victims of the accident, have demonstrated courage and embarked upon a new phase of life just before their deaths. The only reference to the Abbess in this chapter is Uncle Pio's promise to apply to her for a housekeeper to help care for Don Jaime. Thus she is briefly associated with the potential for positive change in this segment of the novel, but it is in the conclusion that her story directly intersects with Camila's so as to further demonstrate her remarkable character.

The final chapter, "Perhaps an Intention," returns to Brother Juniper and his ill-fated effort to discern God's purposes. His conclusions about the characters of the five who died appear simplistic in light of all the reader has learned about them: "He thought he saw in the same accident the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven. He thought he saw pride and wealth confounded as an object lesson to the world, and he thought he saw humility crowned and rewarded for the edification of the city" (139). Unfortunately, Brother Juniper's earnest but misguided study draws

down the wrath of the Church, and he is sentenced to be burned, to the sorrow of his villagers who have loved him. As the Archbishop presumably has the final authority to judge heretics, Brother Juniper's death may be intended as one more count against his character. Although the reader is encouraged to think gently of the Franciscan's good intentions, Wilder now completes his contrast of Brother Juniper with the Abbess.

Madre Maria strives heroically to accept "that it was of no importance whether her work went on or not; it was enough to work. . . . There would be no Pepita to enlarge her work; it would relapse into the indolence and indifference of her colleagues. It seemed to be sufficient for Heaven that for a while in Peru a disinterested love had flowered and faded" (141). Emily Dickinson's Poem #779 honors just such dedication:

The Service without Hope--

Is tenderest, I think--"

.....

There is no Diligence like that--

That knows not an Until--

At this point Madre Maria's situation resembles that of the sister of the twelve brothers when her years of effort seem about to end fruitlessly with her death. However, as in the folktale, circumstances are unexpectedly reversed for the better. The actress Camila, after a year of despairing self-

reproach for failing to show her love for Uncle Pio and Jaime when they were alive, ventures to visit the Abbess, who receives her with gentleness and forbearance. Wilder does not choose to dramatize the full encounter between the two women, but it becomes clear that Madre Maria's effect on Camila is as striking as Dinah's upon Hetty in the prison scene in Eliot's Adam Bede or Dorothea's upon Rosamond in Middlemarch, when she returns to visit her even though she mistakenly fears Rosamond is romantically involved with Ladislaw, as described in Chapter Two of this study.

The final scene of the conclusion takes place somewhat later. The Abbess receives a visit from Dona Clara, the daughter of the Marquesa, just come from Spain. At last Dona Clara speaks favorably of her mother, sharing her magnificent last letter about the nature of love. The Abbess is astonished to find that Pepita's mistress had possessed such grace. "And she was filled with happiness like a girl at this new proof that the traits she lived for were everywhere, that the world was ready" (146). Her vision of disinterested love need not be lost, even without Pepita.

Wilder implies that in real life we are always in the position of the Abbess; we never know the secrets that we as readers can know about the inner lives of individuals and the evidence of divine purpose in the world. Yet the Abbess herself is presented as the embodiment of divine love, even though she never knows all that Wilder has revealed to the reader. Madre

Maria defines herself through service to others by deliberate choice and in defiance of the Archbishop's attitude, just as the folktale sister's concern for her brothers was in defiance of her father's will. As Rex Burbank says, "Saints . . . like Madre Maria . . . affirm that life has meaning and do what they can to give it significance" (129), even though one cannot obtain the kind of certainty Brother Juniper sought.

Thus, it would seem that Wilder is neither simplistic nor sentimental about the human condition. He allows the Abbess to perceive only a small fraction of the design he shows the reader, just as Virginia Woolf creates patterns of imagery in To the Lighthouse that are invisible to the characters in the novel. The significance of Madre Maria's joy during Dona Clara's visit has been largely overlooked. Wilder does imply an affirmation of divine purpose in the unexpected resolution of Madre Maria's two great desires: responsible followers and money to carry on her work. At the end of the novel, she is sending Camila across the city, indicating that she is trusted to carry out some task on her own for the Abbess. Furthermore, Madre Maria is showing all her work to Dona Clara, who has inherited her mother's great wealth and who has been carefully established by the author as someone who delights in being charitable to worthy causes (16-17). This woman, who regards everyone in need of her "kind offices" as "her children" (16), follows the "tired, bright old woman" through corridor after corridor, seeing the

orphans, the aged, the sick and the blind (146). At last she listens to the Abbess' benediction to the very ill, whom she compares to "children" (147). Since the Abbess was originally introduced as one of the most famous women of Peru in the fictional history within Wilder's novel, her work clearly does not flower and fade, as she feared. It is explicit that Camila is becoming a trusted assistant, and implicit that Dona Clara is moved to provide financial support. This ending, though entirely realistic, is as wondrous in its way as the conclusion of the Grimm folktale when the twelve brothers descend and regain their human forms, so that their sister's long selfless efforts are not in vain.

Madre Maria's dreams are fulfilled in ways that would not have occurred without the fall of the bridge. It still does not follow that the author's theme is that God directly intervened to make the bridge fall, but rather that God can influence persons through any circumstance to bring about positive changes, if they are responsive to these influences or "impulses" of the "love that made them" (148). Thus Wilder's affirmation of divine design is much more subtle than it may at first appear. As Warren French observes, it is a comment on our loveless society that Thornton Wilder has gone relatively unappreciated because of his emphasis on the power of love (ii).

The Bridge of San Luis Rey concludes with Madre Maria's reflection:

"There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning" (148). Similarly, Emily Dickinson's Poem #915 affirms,

Faith--is the Pierless Bridge  
 Supporting what We see  
 Unto the Scene that We do not--  
 Too slender for the eye

The opening paragraph of Wilder's novel describes the literal bridge of San Luis Rey as but "a mere ladder of thin slats swung out over the gorge, with handrails of dried vine" (3), yet almost every foot traveler had trusted it rather than descend the chasm to cross the narrow stream below. Thus, Wilder, like Dickinson, reveals an ironic recognition of ambiguity in the universe, to which individuals can respond with faith but not with certainties.

Dickinson modifies the metaphor in Poem #1433, sent to T. W.

Higginson several months after the death of his wife:

How brittle are the Piers  
 On which our Faith doth tread--  
 No Bridge below doth totter so--  
 Yet none hath such a Crowd.

Here, instead of faith being directly identified as the bridge, "our Faith" is the traveler crossing a bridge built by God and tested by Christ--like Wilder's bridge of love between this world and the next.

The affinity between Dickinson and Wilder is reinforced in the last scene of his play Our Town, in which another Emily (named for the poet?) cries out, "Do any human beings realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?" The Stage Manager slowly replies, "No. . . . The saints and poets, maybe--they do some" (138-39). Some years later, Wilder's Atlantic Monthly essay would pay fitting tribute to a member of that company: "Emily Dickinson, in all appearance the loneliest of beings, solved the problem in a way which is of importance to every American: by loving the particular while living in the universal" ("Emily Dickinson" 63).

#### Miss Jane Pittmann: Survivor and Storyteller

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man;

And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;

Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith,

And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?



I tell you that he shall avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Luke 18:1-8

People's always looking for somebody to come lead them. Go to the Old Testament, go to the New. They did it in slavery; after the war they did it; they did it in the hard times that people want call Reconstruction; they did it in the Depression--another hard times; and they doing it now. They have always done it--and the Lord has always obliged in some way or another.

Ernest Gaines, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittmann, Book IV

We never know how high we are  
Till we are asked to rise  
And then if we are true to plan,  
Our statures touch the skies--

Dickinson, #1176

Through the fictional "autobiography" of Miss Jane Pittmann, Ernest Gaines suggests that we are all responsible for one another, and that courageous endurance not only may permit survival, but may contribute to positive change. Miss Jane resembles the silent sister of the twelve brothers, who maintained her integrity and did what she thought right throughout the seven years in order to save her brothers. Resisting injustice indirectly for the most part, Miss Jane reaches heroic stature and enables others to resist more effectively. She must wait far more than seven years to see significant social reform. Her long life, from childhood to about 110, is punctuated by the deaths of a strong woman and four young men. Each situation reveals

new aspects of Jane's personality, both through her participation in the events she recalls and through her commentary as she remembers them. As with Emily Dickinson, Jane's merits are recognized very gradually. Her influence on others becomes increasingly evident throughout the novel. A common theme of leadership runs throughout her stories, but at the end she herself is the real leader, truly free at last.

Jane is strong, courageous, unselfish, loving, independent, and forgiving, becoming a respected elder member of her community. Her life story is introduced by a history teacher who has asked permission to tape her memories and share them with his students. At first she is too modest to comply, but eventually gives in. "When she spoke she used as few words as possible to make her point" (Gaines vii). Her account is indeed concise, direct, forthright, and matter-of-fact, no matter what horrors she describes, keeping the incredible fact of her survival before us. Other members of the community gather to listen and occasionally assist in the storytelling, making clear--as Marcia Gaudet points out--their consensus that her life is worthy of being recorded (157). Similarly, many black female readers have praised the authenticity of Miss Jane's personality and experiences (Doyle 104).

Jane's courage is first displayed in her memories of the end of the Civil War. A small pre-teen orphan at the time, she sets out for the North with numerous other former slaves from the same Louisiana plantation. The

party is attacked by poor white patrollers, who murder all but Jane and Ned, a still smaller child. His mother, Big Laura, had been a natural leader who seemed to know which way to go and who saved Jane from being raped by one of the freedmen. Jane finds Laura dead with Ned's infant sister in her arms, near the bodies of two men she managed to kill before their comrades killed her and her child. Realizing she no longer has Laura to guide her, Jane begins to exercise her own resourcefulness. She determines to continue trying to go North with Ned, taking extra clothes, food, and Big Laura's flint and iron, which Ned carries. It is as if a fire lit by Big Laura burns on within the two children.

Although Jane never directly admits to giving up hope of getting to Ohio, she stops wandering just after an old white man takes time to show her a map and explain in detail how unrealistic it is for her to attempt such a long journey without income or assistance. She finds work with a relatively humane plantation owner who arranges for Ned to start schooling. Like the folktale sister, Jane literally saves her "brother's" life and gives him a future, whereas she could have thought only of herself. Ned begins calling her Mama even though she is only about eight years older. Unfortunately her employer loses his property to one Colonel Dye who returns the people to a condition as near slavery as Reconstruction law allows. Ned becomes active with a committee that looks out for the welfare of the colored people in the

region and helps those who desire to start traveling North. When the Ku Klux Klan learns of his activities, he is forced to flee, but he cannot persuade Jane to leave with him. She no longer believes her situation will improve if she goes North, but she encourages Ned to go and seek a better life.

Ned finds it difficult to understand her choice, even as many have found it hard to understand why Dickinson remained quietly at home instead of going away to publicly establish herself in literary circles as many other female poets in fact managed to do during her lifetime. Why do not these silent sisters take advantage of potential opportunities? Ned feels that he is leaving Jane in the position of a dog eating crumbs from the floor--the image used by the Gentile mother who persisted in asking Jesus to heal her daughter in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, as discussed in Chapter One. But Jane does not see herself as a dog eating crumbs; she has a mysterious self-confidence like that of Dickinson's persona who declares,

Who Court obtain within Himself

Sees every Man a King--

And Poverty of Monarchy

Is an interior thing-- (#803)

A similar sense of inner worth seems evident in Joe Pittmann, who becomes Jane's common-law husband. Their relationship is based on warm companionship rather than material goods or even children; Joe says he does

not mind that childhood injuries have left Jane barren. The couple improve their circumstances by going away to the Clyde plantation near the Texas border where Jane works in the house and Joe gains fame as the champion breaker of horses. He loves his dangerous occupation despite Jane's nightmares of his impending death. "Breaking horses, I don't take orders from a soul on earth. That's why they calls me Chief. Maybe one day one of them'll come along and get me. Maybe I'll get too old and just have to step down. . . . But till that day get here I got to keep going. That's what life's about, doing it as good as you can" (85).

When a wild black horse is brought in that Jane has been seeing in her dreams, she desperately turns to a voodoo woman to seek some means of protecting Joe, but to no avail. The fateful horse does cause Joe's death. His excellence in his profession is honored at the next rodeo by tolling the bell for a full minute in his memory. "Man must always search somewhere to prove himself," the old voodoo woman declares. "He don't know everything is already inside him" (95). This is the lesson Jane seems to have been born knowing, whether or not Joe Pittmann did. As Emily Dickinson expressed it: "Reverse cannot befall / That fine Prosperity / Whose Sources are interior" (#395). Like Dickinson's persona, Jane has the inner resources to withstand the external reversals she must endure.

Another chapter of Jane's life begins as Ned returns to her with a wife and family and many gifts to express his affection and gratitude. He immediately sets up a school for the colored children and travels around the countryside preaching integration, thereby attracting the resentment of white authorities. Ned is shot by a hired killer, an old Cajun, Albert Cluveau, who has often fished with Jane and drunk her coffee, yet kills "her boy" when he is ordered to do so. Jane is devastated, saying that when the chariots of hell come for Cluveau, his screaming will be heard all over the parish (Gaines 121). The profound racism in the society is illustrated by the fact that no legal action against the white murderer of a black person can be expected--nor can it be when Jimmy is killed at the end of the novel. Ironically, as Keith Byerson points out, Cluveau's guilty conscience is an aberration in the white South. (111-12). Jane's forgiveness of him is implicit in that she is the only person in the parish who does not go to hear Cluveau scream in his dying delirium. She does not hate him; she even pities him. Clearly Ned is an outstanding leader who literally dies for his people, but the reader can see that all he accomplished would never have happened if Jane had not cared for him in his childhood and helped him to get his first schooling.

Jane's strength of character is tested yet again tested after she moves to the Samson plantation to be a little farther away from the site of her

painful memories. Robert Samson proves to be a classic example of a racist white ruling-class male who makes the Negro people feel their inferior status at every turn. His wife Miss Amma Dean occasionally tries to remonstrate with him, but he does not listen. Their son, young Robert, tragically commits suicide because he falls in love with a beautiful mulatto schoolteacher, Mary Agnes. Through this incident, Gaines illustrates that an unjust society is unhealthy even for those who appear to be its privileged members. Young Robert is utterly incapable of becoming the kind of patriarchal leader that his father is and that everyone he knows expects him to be. He confides in a friend who tells him if he wants the girl to go and take her, but marriage would be unthinkable. Thus, when he cannot get Mary Agnes to go away with him, he takes his own life, primarily, as Byerson puts it, because he cannot tolerate being "another white man who, if he chooses, can exploit, abuse, and rape black women with impunity" (112). As Mary Agnes says, "Robert is more human being than he is white man" (Gaines 169).

Gaines's themes in this section of the novel are clarified through Young Robert's old godfather Jules Raynard, who takes charge of the situation and helps Mary Agnes to leave the parish without being harmed by anyone who would blame her for the death. Alone with Miss Jane, with whom he enjoys conversing whenever he visits the house, he then grimly proceeds to condemn all of them--the Samsons, the friend, the community, himself, and Jane--for

the tragedy. At first Jane is baffled by this pronouncement, but we are indirectly led to see what Jules Raynard means. Such incidents never come about because of one powerful man like Robert Samson. Rather, it is because everyone else in the society, sometimes reluctantly, goes along with a corrupt social system. If Jane, young Robert's mother, and enough of his friends could accept the possibility of an interracial marriage, a few virulent racists would no longer be in control. This theme is conveyed through Jane's recollection of how young Robert had suffered in his childhood because of the mistreatment of his colored half-brother Timmy. Robert Samson had been obliged to send Timmy away to save him from a murderous overseer who wanted to kill Timmy simply for having asserted himself. Young Robert missed his brother, and Jane relates that she, his mother, his godfather, and everyone else had tried to explain the matter to him:

All of us tried except Robert. Robert thought he didn't have to tell Tee Bob [Young Robert's nickname] about these things. They was part of life, like the sun and the rain was part of life, and Tee Bob would learn them for himself when he got older. But Tee Bob never did. He killed himself before he learned how he was supposed to live in this world. (147).

He had to die for all their sins, Jules Raynard says. Perhaps he would have lived if enough people simply waked up one morning and refused to take



social inequalities for granted. Emily Dickinson had precisely summarized the same principle in Poem #1698:

'Tis easier to pity those when dead  
 That which pity previous  
 Would have saved--  
 A Tragedy enacted  
 Secures Applause  
 That Tragedy enacting  
 Too seldom does.

In the final section of her memoirs, Jane makes it still clearer that even those at the bottom of social hierarchies are partly at fault for accepting their lot as inevitable. This part of her story focuses on Jimmy, a promising child for whom the community had high hopes, calling him "the One." He grows up to be a civil rights activist and comes home to try to get his people to participate in a demonstration in the nearby town of Bayonne. Robert Samson has already evicted one woman whose son joined a demonstration, and warns that he will do the same to anyone else who tries it, old or young. However, Jane and several others of the community intend to go anyway. When Robert Samson brings word that Jimmy has been shot, Miss Jane speaks up to him and walks past him, still determined to go to Bayonne as she had promised Jimmy. At the end of her life, Miss Jane is publicly a

leader at last. She is the real One, the sister who has endured and is risking everything for her people, at the age of over a hundred.

By no means everyone in the community is ready to openly disobey Robert Samson. Miss Jane understands that many of her neighbors are still too bound by fear to face their individual responsibility to strive for a just world. Before Jimmy was killed, she had inwardly described this fear as she watched him trying to move the people to action,

Black curtains hang at their windows, Jimmy; black quilts cover their body at night; a black veil covers their eyes. . . .They want you, Jimmy, but now you here they don't understand nothing you're telling them. You see, Jimmy, they want you to cure the ache, but they want you to do it and don't give them pain. . . . But look at me acting high and mighty. Don't that black curtain hang over my window; don't the veil cover my face? (236-37)

It has taken her many years to push the curtains away and directly defy Robert Samson and all he stands for, but now her indomitable spirit shines out for her people more than ever before. As Valerie Babb notes, she has come full circle from leading little Ned in the beginning to leading the entire community in the end (95). As she had said, when the people need a leader, "the Lord has always obliged in some way or another" (199). Again, one of Emily Dickinson's poems aptly sums up the situation:

We never know how high we are  
Till we are asked to rise  
And then if we are true to plan  
Our statures touch the skies-- (#1176)

We are not told what Robert's reaction is, but the history teacher's account at the beginning of the novel implies that the same community of people are still living there together and therefore that Robert did not evict them. Evidently there were just too many of them for even Robert to make good his threat. This is what Jules Raynard had meant: change can occur if enough people have the courage to stand up for it.

Miss Jane is among the more explicitly Christian heroines of this study, although she does not become a church member until she is past sixty--a circumstance Emily Dickinson would doubtless have understood. Despite all her trials, Jane manages to love life, baseball, and vanilla ice cream. Nature is a part of her spirituality, especially the river and the old oak tree where she likes to go alone. Some time after moving to the Samson plantation, she has a dream-vision which she describes to her church and which is a kind of metaphor for her life. She seemed to be carrying a heavy load of bricks, and Christ told her to take it across a wide river, where she would be freed from her burden. Miss Jane persevered although snakes and alligators surrounded her, and the devil disguised himself in turn as Ned,

Joe, and Albert Cluveau to persuade her into turning back. "And as soon as I put my feet on solid ground the Savior was there. He smiled down at me and raised the load off my shoulder. I wanted to bow to his feet, but he told me rise" (138).

Early in his career, according to Anne Simpson, Ernest Gaines became "convinced that religion neither prevented problems nor solved them, though he always felt it important to believe in something higher than oneself" (10). Certainly he accords deep significance to Jane's religious experiences, yet without sentimentally implying that they change her external circumstances. Just as she was determined to cross the river, Jane has somehow kept going through ordeals that might have broken a frailer spirit. Gaines has eloquently summarized his view of Miss Jane's character:

If she could come out as a whole human being after living 110 years with the kind of life she had to live, she is worth writing about. Survival with sanity and love and a sense of responsibility, and getting up and trying all over again not only for oneself but for mankind--these achievements I find worth writing about. (qtd. in Simpson 258)

Miss Jane walks past Robert not only for herself and the current community, but also in memory of Big Laura who was her first role model, in memory of Joe Pittmann who strove for excellence, in memory of Ned the

courageous educator, in memory of young Robert who never understood how to live in a world divided by race and class, and in memory of Jimmy who had inspired the people's nonviolent resistance. As the history teacher comments before Jane begins her tale, "Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and all of their stories are Miss Jane's" (vii). She is storyteller as well as survivor. It is her gift to contribute to reform through precisely articulating the complex sorrows and joys of individual human experience in behalf of those who lack ability or opportunity to do so for themselves--the same gift Joanne Dobson attributes to Emily Dickinson (97). The point is not to imply that Gaines deliberately alludes to Dickinson, or to gloss over the obvious socioeconomic differences between the Amherst poet and the character of Miss Jane, but rather to show that those differences of circumstances could not destroy the integrity of spirit enabling each to survive "with sanity and love and a sense of responsibility."

### Breaking the Silences: Tillie Olsen's Affirmation of Mothers

Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

Matt. 20:22

It is a long baptism into the sea of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched.

Tillie Olsen, "O Yes"

If my Bark sink  
 'Tis to another sea--  
 Mortality's Ground Floor  
 Is Immortality--

Dickinson, #1234

Whereas Miss Jane Pittmann's autobiography is purportedly transcribed by a young schoolteacher, the characters of Tillie Olsen's short stories are the direct creations of someone whose life very closely resembles theirs. Surviving poverty greater than most literary figures have ever known, Tillie Olsen shatters the popular notion that feminism is a self-centered philosophy for bored and wealthy women. Born in 1913, Olsen dropped out of high school to enter the world of tedious jobs that provide essential income but little fulfillment. She became a social and political activist, deeply committed to the labor movement. Obligated to continue working while she married and raised four children, Tillie Olsen pursued her education through public libraries and struggled to write as she rode public transportation or paused over the ironing board in the late night hours. In 1961 she published the immediately acclaimed collection of four short stories, Tell Me a Riddle, the first step toward a future of receiving honorary degrees and teaching at major universities. In the leisure gained by long-deferred fame and grant money, she might have satisfied her burning desire to write many more stories and novels. Instead, her concern for the plight of others whose talents have been and are being frustrated moved her to devote her

time and energy to the remarkable volume Silences (1978). This work deserves to stand beside Woolf's A Room of One's Own as a classic analysis of the obstacles hindering women, especially mothers, from expressing their vision of life through writing. Olsen's object in Silences is to call attention to the involuntary silences of creative women--and sometimes men--but the volume itself is a new version of the folktale sister's voluntary silence, as it represents the author's sacrifice of some of her own opportunities for artistic creativity, in order to benefit others.

Olsen reminds us how few well-known women writers have been mothers. In fact, many (like Emily Dickinson, to whom Olsen frequently alludes) appear to have experienced conflict between their desire to write and the example and/or expectations of their mothers. It is very rare in literature for young girls to find mothers portrayed as role models for their daughters (see Jacqueline Berke, "'Mother I Can Do It Myself!': The Self-Sufficient Heroine in Popular Girls' Fiction"). Similarly, in the anonymous fairy tales still influencing us, good mothers are frequently dead, while wicked stepmothers are very much alive. In "The Twelve Brothers," it will be recalled that the queen mother is alive but sadly ineffectual in coping with an adverse situation. Although the heroine becomes a mother, we do not see her performing in that role. The scarcity of sympathetic portrayals of mothers is not surprising, considering that patriarchal societies in the real

world make it very difficult for mothers to write themselves into our literature. As Olsen says, "the circumstances for sustained creation have been almost impossible. . . . More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible. . . . Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage--at best--lesser accomplishment" (Silences 18-19). One of Olsen's most telling anecdotes relates that the Australian author H. H. Richardson, when asked why she had no children, responded, "There are enough women to do the childbearing and childrearing. I know of none who can write my books." Olsen remembers "thinking rebelliously, yes, and I know of none who can bear and rear my children either" (19). Almost miraculously, something of that responsiveness and responsibility has been preserved in her few pieces of published literature.

Of the four stories in Tell Me a Riddle, "I Stand Here Ironing" and the title story have received the most critical acclaim and are frequently anthologized. Elizabeth Fisher reflects this consensus when she refers to the other two stories as "strong and well-worked" pieces that "would be accounted great if someone else had written them; they fade only beside the raw strength" of the first-mentioned ones (116). In the context of the tradition being examined here, however, this verdict must be questioned. Exactly why are the more tragic of Olsen's stories so emphasized at the



expense of the others, even as the agonized Sylvia Plath was for many years almost the only female poet considered worth presenting to students of contemporary American poetry? In "Hey Sailor What Ship?" Olsen poignantly portrays the home of "Lennie and Helen and the kids" as a beacon of light and comfort to the old sailor Whitey (22). In contrast to the painfully strained relationship of Len's parents David and Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle," Helen and Len's marriage seems grounded in mutual understanding and the determination to teach their children respect for every human being. In "O Yes," the story most relevant to the present study, Olsen portrays the interracial friendship of Helen and Alva, two poor working mothers who appear as role models for their daughters. Such images suggest that T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* is by no means the governing metaphor for the twentieth-century experience of women, the poor, and the minorities whose voices are at last being heard.

Helen and her close friend Alva are saddened by the weakening bonds between their twelve-year-old daughters Carol and Parry as they confront the peer pressures and adjustments of junior high school. During Parry's baptismal service, Carol is overcome by the unfamiliar swirling music in the Negro church, the shimmering heat, the preacher's passionate eloquence, and the dramatic emotional responses of the congregation. After Carol faints and is taken out, Alva tries to explain to her the pouring out of weariness and

suffering and fears in this church, a second home where all will understand. Inwardly recalling a spiritual experience of her own youth, Alva remembers her paradoxical sense of freedom when she accepted the message, "You must help carry the world" (61). But Carol is in no state to listen. Her struggle to regain full consciousness is brilliantly rendered with images of drowning in deep waters:

So high up and forgotten the waves and the world, so  
stirless the deep cool green and the wrecks of what had been. . . .

Bubbles of breath that swell. . . . The light of day blazes  
up and Alva is holding a cup, saying: Drink this, baby.

"DRINK IT." Her mother's voice and the numbing air  
demanding her to pay attention. (58)

This juxtaposition of images recalls Jesus' challenge to his followers James and John, "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Matt. 20:22). Being a disciple is not easy, he implies; it indeed requires the willingness to "help carry the world." Yet Christ elsewhere assures his followers that they will find their burden light.

However, Carol is not yet able to understand the faith that sustains Alva. Still drowning in confusion and embarrassment, she increasingly avoids Parry over the next several months. At last, on a day when sickness

forces Carol to stay home from school, Parry comes bustling in with assignments and textbooks, telling the news, straightening the room, offering juice to drink, and leaving again without mentioning the condescending teacher who had asked, "Does your mother work for Carol's mother? Oh, you're neighbors!" (67). As Elaine Neil Orr aptly observes, "Parry leaves her mark. . . . She invites her friend to bring the past into the present and to follow the voice within her, to know herself as the one who must carry the world, one who must go higher" (101). Soon afterwards, upon hearing gospel music swirling from Helen's radio, Carol rushes to her mother in a flood of pent-up tears and questions. Why did the people act like that in Parry's church? Why do the other girls and teachers in junior high school reject Parry? "Oh, why is it like it is, and why do I have to care?" (71).

Much has been said of Helen's silence as she tries to comfort her distraught child, considering and discarding one response after another. Elizabeth Fisher comments that the white girl "doesn't want to be oppressed by life," and her mother is "helpless with her own unassuaged needs," unable to offer any answers (117). Similarly, Constance Coiner observes that Olsen, like Helen, does not supply "definitive answers," and questions whether the silence of both is a failure of responsibility, to Carol and to readers, or whether the author is deliberately encouraging readers' participation in a Bakhtinian dialogue with the characters (187). Even Nancy Huse, whose

reading of "O Yes" is more extensive and perceptive than most, describes Helen as speaking "from betrayal and shame about the possibility of friendship" as she finally responds to her daughter (202). But it is crucial to notice that Helen speaks just after Carol, "convulsed and shamed," comes to the heart of the matter: "And I'm not really her friend any more" (70). It is a moment of confession, of realizing that she herself is guilty of contributing to the problems of racial discrimination rather than helping to solve them. And Helen, the mother confessor, at last brings herself to say aloud, "But may be friends again. As Alva and I are" (70).

Surely there could be no better answer than to offer this incredible hope by means of example. How many such intimate interracial friendships existed in the 1950s between adult women, let alone twelve-year-old girls? Olsen reminds us here that actions speak louder than words. Precisely because the mothers' friendship has continued, it is Carol (not Helen, as assumed by the critics just mentioned) who is coming to face her own "Betrayal and shame" (Olsen 71), the betrayal of her friend for thirty pieces of silver in the form of popularity with the "right" crowd. Because she has experienced Parry's baptismal service, Carol cannot help grieving over Vicky, another girl who was in the church that day, who is acquiring a bad reputation at school. Because of her years of sisterhood with Parry, fostered by their mothers' friendship, Carol finds herself identifying with Vicky's

difficulties: "Oh why do I have to feel it happens to me too?" (71). When Carol cries out "Oh . . . why do I have to care?" she does not mean "Why am I being required to care?" as Fisher's interpretation implies, so much as "Why is it I cannot help caring?"

"Caring asks doing," Helen reflects. "It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched" (71). Carol will never be able to forget her baptism into sisterhood with all of humanity. Helen's friendship with Alva is neither a fundamentalist dream of pie in the sky nor an ideal to be realized when the revolution comes; it is a reality and a symbol of possibility for their daughters' generation.

In this world of racism, alcoholism, tiring jobs, and shabby rooms, Alva, Helen, and Len embody the same mystery of self-giving that is observable in the Gospel stories and the folktale of "The Twelve Brothers." Perhaps more than any of Olsen's other stories, "O Yes" conveys the theme that to find freedom, we must "help carry the world." Tillie Olsen, who knows the degradation of poverty firsthand, nonetheless insists that individuals can and must start from where they are upon the search for personal integrity and social justice. It is not enough simply to hope for the great society, or, in religious language, for the coming of the kingdom. Although Olsen has worked for political and economic reforms throughout her life, she illustrates the necessity for inner change in individuals as well.

Even though she describes herself as an atheist, a common position among socialist activists of her generation, she conveys the power of the religious community that sustains Alva in much greater detail than she conveys Helen's inner longing for "the place of strength that was not" (71). Like Emily Dickinson's personae, she has the ability to represent the truths inherent in seemingly opposed realities.

Furthermore, Olsen's extraordinary ability to render the emotions and experience of both mothers and daughters with equal sensitivity serves to strengthen her impassioned argument in Silences that the scarcity of mothers' voices has been a great loss to literary history. Elaine Neil Orr believes that "O Yes" is somewhat marred by "the lack of a central consciousness among the characters; we are not certain whose story this is" (94). Yet this multiplicity of perspective might well be praised as profoundly realistic, even as the events of the real world are simultaneously part of many lives. So also the death of Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse affects everyone who knew her, or the fall of the bridge of San Luis Rey forms part of many stories.

The power of Olsen's vision may be further supported by my own unusual experience of rediscovering "O Yes" after an interval of almost twenty years. When Silences was newly published, it immediately attracted my attention and moved me to seek out Olsen's short stories. As I began the

third one, "O Yes," I was struck with the certainty that I had read it before. A glance at the copyright page confirmed that the stories had originally been published separately in periodicals, and I remembered the small print covering the oversized pages of my mother's Ladies Home Journal where I had first read "O Yes" at approximately the age of the daughters Carol and Parry. I recalled being slightly confused by the unconventional poetic style which I knew even then to be atypical of the fiction appearing in women's magazines of the day. Approaching thirty as a wife and mother with two small daughters and too little time, money, or sleep to imagine how I might find a way to write or study in the future, I read the story again through a mother's eyes and marveled at the authenticity of its many voices and its affirmation of human dignity. From that time on Olsen and her characters were among the sources of my desire to trace the presence of female role models throughout literature. Perhaps even more important, Tillie Olsen's life story made such a hope seem possible.

#### Where Journeys Merge: Coming of Age in The Beginning Place

This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. . . .

Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends.

John 15: 12, 15

It is royalty that call each other sister, brother.

Ursula K. LeGuin, The Beginning Place

He was weak, and I was strong--then--  
 So He let me lead him in--  
 I was weak, and He was strong, then--  
 So I let him lead me--Home.

Dickinson, #190

Although Ursula K. Le Guin's varied works have attracted a growing body of academic criticism, The Beginning Place (1980) has received surprisingly little attention. This intricately structured coming-of-age novel moves back and forth between a harshly drawn contemporary setting and a mysterious twilight land, defying conventional categories of realism and fantasy. The few interpretations of The Beginning Place have been largely psychoanalytical, yielding some valid insights, but hardly doing justice to the novel's complexity. Le Guin incorporates several elements of the traditional bildungsroman, yet contrives to integrate a "masculine" separation/independence pattern of development with a "feminine" pattern of accepting responsibility and finding community--a contrast drawn from the research of Grace Ann Hovet (21). The Beginning Place merits further exploration of its evocative symbolism, its adroit shifts of perspective and setting, and above all its androgynous vision of heroism, reaffirming and fulfilling the similar visions of Virginia Woolf and of D. H. Lawrence.



In brief summary, the plot concerns two young people, Hugh and Irena, both struggling with difficult family circumstances beyond their control. Each separately finds refuge in a secret place of natural beauty in a patch of woods behind a paint factory. Soon Hugh also finds a hidden village, where Irena has been coming for some years. Although they see one another as intruders in this place of personal renewal, they voluntarily agree to go on a mysterious quest in behalf of this community which has shown them more kindness than either has known in the outer world. On their journey toward the royal city to seek help against the unexplained threat hanging over the village, they find they must contend with a monstrous white dragon. Although gigantic, the creature appears to be both blind and lame. Hugh manages to kill it, but falls beneath it. Thus Irena has the task of hauling the monster away and restoring Hugh to consciousness. He sees the dragon as male, whereas she perceives it as female. Formerly Irena had been infatuated with the dark Byronic Master of the village, and Hugh had likewise been smitten with Lord Horn's beautiful daughter Allia. Now through the quest undertaken for the sake of others, they have come to recognize one another's merits, consummating their new-found love and sharing their hopes for more education and more fulfilling work. After much wandering they finally find the gateway to the outer world, where Hugh's injuries are real enough to require hospitalization. The other tangible

evidence of their experience is Irena's red cloak, made of fine wool such as the village weavers use for royalty. Their strange quest ends with the beginning of their new life together.

This seemingly simple tale is carefully structured to support its theme of androgyny. Narrated in the third person, it has eight chapters alternating between the perspectives of Hugh and Irena, followed by a ninth part consisting almost entirely of their conversation in the hospital room. The action is also divided almost evenly between the outer world and the twilight land. Although the reader does see both settings through both viewpoints, Irena's consciousness is used somewhat more in the twilight land (which is appropriate since she has known the place longer), whereas Hugh's thoughts convey somewhat more of the events of the outer world. The scenes of the hidden country are conveyed in a more heightened language than is used in scenes of the everyday world; Le Guin creates many moments of welcome humor by juxtaposing the informal speech of contemporary adolescents with the more measured style suggestive of knightly romance.

In some respects, The Beginning Place follows the traditional model of a bildungsroman. According to Jerome Buckley's classic description, the bildungsroman usually focuses on a single protagonist who experiences many constraints during childhood. Frequently the father is either missing or at best unsympathetically portrayed. Feeling alienated from his environment,

the youth often goes on a journey in search of broader experience, a possible career, a philosophy of life, and perhaps a mentor to advise him. He frequently has two love affairs, one inspiring and one degrading. Through painful ordeals and moments of epiphany, the protagonist gradually attains some measure of self-knowledge, maturity, and responsibility. The bildungsroman's ending is often inconclusive because much of life still lies ahead, even though it commonly includes some re-integration with the larger society (17).

LeGuin does depart in some significant ways from this traditional paradigm. Hugh and Irena are both rather isolated individuals, restricted by their home environments. When Hugh was only thirteen, his father abandoned wife and son, after cryptically telling the boy "I can count on you. . . . Your mom's got to have someone to depend on" (60). In fact, the mother's emotional shock has left her abnormally possessive of her son. She does not want him to date or otherwise be out of the house except for his supermarket job--even when she is at work or with friends. Hugh gives up his dream of studying to be a librarian and becomes overweight from lack of activity. One night, overwhelmed by a sense of claustrophobia, he runs blindly far away from the house and accidentally stumbles into the forest glade where a stream of water sings.

To Irena, this spot is "the beginning place," the entrance to the hidden land of Tembreabrazi. The fact that she has been visiting there for some years is useful to the plot in that her knowledge of the language enables her to translate for Hugh and the village leaders, who seem to have expected his coming. Less obvious, perhaps, is that Irena found the place sooner than Hugh because she needed it even more. Her mother had been widowed after three happy years of marriage to Irena's father, but later married the rough mechanic Victor Hansen and bore him several more children. Irena has all the makings of an angry young feminist. She has already left home to share an apartment with two unmarried friends to avoid being raped by her stepfather. She cannot turn to her full brother Michael for help because he would blame Victor's harassment on Irena herself. Barbara Bucknall comments simply that "she is afraid to tell her mother" (147), overlooking Irena's mature awareness that her mother's entire life centers around family loyalty. Being forced to side with her beloved daughter against her husband would be too much for her emotionally and might make her the object of Victor's further abuse (73). At the time Irena meets Hugh, her two friends have broken up and she needs to find another apartment in order to avoid returning to her former home.

As in the traditional bildungsroman, then, these troubled and fatherless young people have independently sought out the renewal they need

to cope with their outer lives. In gratitude, they accept the responsibility of making a journey that no one from the village seems able to undertake. Even the somber Master collapses in shame and terror when he secretly attempts to begin the quest, in the vain hope of winning any glory Hugh might otherwise earn. From that moment Irena sees his character clearly and is free of her hopeless love for him. She still resents Hugh, but she goes with him as a comrade, not as a master's handmaid.

Both Irena and Hugh have unexpectedly found a father-figure in old Lord Horn, who seems to be the village wise man as well a titled nobleman. Confident that they are the ones called to save the village, the Lord gives Hugh his own sword to take on the dangerous journey to the royal city, where no one but himself has ever been. Early in the quest, Hugh is occupied with thoughts of Lord Horn's tall fair daughter Allia. However, when he regains consciousness after killing the dragon, he is overwhelmed to realize Irena has twice saved his life--first by provoking the dragon to come out of its cave rather than let Hugh enter there, and later by rescuing him from beneath the ghastly body of the creature. Le Guin deftly illustrates the difference between courtly love-at-first-sight for a stereotypical beauty and the love inspired by this small dark-haired girl who endures the rigors of the journey, literally rescues him from death, and draws upon her better knowledge of the land to discover a pathway out. Irena is akin to Shakespeare's resourceful

heroines who can successfully disguise themselves as men or otherwise contrive means of solving their difficulties. Conversely, Hugh is as humble and gentle a man as any feminist might desire. In contrast to Irena's appropriately named stepfather, Victor, Hugh "did not come to her with judgments, or with a place for her or a name or a use for her. He came with nothing at all but strength and need" (170).

Thus, Le Guin effectively uses two archetypes observed by Annis Pratt in female novels of development: the rape trauma and the green world lover (16-29). Irena turns from the gender-divided society represented by her aggressive stepfather to find refuge in the natural world. In this novel, the relationship with the green world lover is not thwarted, as often happens (Pratt 24), but is to be continued in the midst of society. For reasons that must be further examined, the lovers no longer seem to think of finding the royal city. Instead they discuss Hugh's dream of library school, Irena's dissatisfaction with her job as a corporate errandperson, and the possibility of combining work with night classes. When they reach the outer world, it proves to be Labor Day weekend, which would be an appropriate time to act on their hopes and enroll at a college. Irena is dismayed that Hugh's neurotic mother is too angry to care that her son is in the hospital; instead she hands Irena his suitcase, saying, "He doesn't have to come back after this" (182).

Hugh is thus free--free to go home with Irena to the new apartment she manages to find.

The Beginning Place has some significant affinities with the works of D. H. Lawrence. Although Le Guin grew up in much more comfortable material circumstances than did Lawrence, she successfully conveys the experiences and speech of her less privileged protagonists Hugh and Irena. Hugh's mother is like a demonized exaggeration of Mrs. Morel in Sons and Lovers. However, it is Lawrence's symbolic parable, The Man Who Died, that truly parallels The Beginning Place. Irena's concerned exploration of Hugh's injuries, including the great bruise sustained from the sword hilt protruding from the falling monster, is reminiscent of the healing ministrations of the priestess of Isis to the man who had died. Even as the priestess is savior of the Osiris/Christ figure in Lawrence's tale, so Irena saves Hugh from death and emotional isolation. In each case the lovemaking represents the natural coming together of two complementary beings, neither subordinate to the other. By 1980 it would seem that most of society had not yet caught up with either Lawrence or Le Guin.

Le Guin's lifelong love of Taoist philosophy influences the egalitarian portrayal of the sexes in The Beginning Place. Hugh can always find the way into the twilight land, and Irena can always find the way out. Even in their physical appearance, they are complementary: Hugh tall, husky, and fair,

Irena small, slender and dark. Lord Horn knows their mission cannot succeed unless both are willing to undertake it: "One and other, other and one. It is two that go that road" (87).

According to Grace Ann Hovet, the traditional myth of development, as seen in literary works and described by such scholars as Joseph Campbell and Eric Erikson, represents male experience rather than universal realities (17-19). Hovet finds that female novels of development frequently involve forming close relationships and accepting responsibility, rather than separating from relationships and going on adventurous journeys to establish independence (21). For Hugh and Irena, these differing paths merge and arrive at the same place. Their story is in some ways a very traditional quest-centered romance, yet at the same time a new myth incorporating the importance of human relationships and responsibility to others.

Hovet's research further suggests that finding one's own "voice" is characteristic of narratives of female development, as opposed to the "vision" metaphors commonly found in male stories (20-21). Although Hovet seems to exaggerate the gender-specific nature of these metaphors, Irena's mastery of the twilight land's language is indeed significant. However, it turns out that she never has to translate during the quest for the royal city. Rather, when Hugh falls unconscious again upon re-entering the outer world, it is Irena who must speak to the red-bearded driver who assists them, to the doctor, to



Hugh's mother, and to the couple who agree to rent them an apartment. "It is royalty that call each other sister, brother," she muses in her gratitude to the friendly driver (180). After the dragon's death, Irena and Hugh are each referred to as the child of a king (160, 175). Perhaps the real city is, at least potentially, the royal city of their destination, where Hugh and Irena are themselves the unacknowledged King and Queen.

As Eric Rabkin suggests, "Fantasy creates an illusion of newness, of the source of human terror, and shows it--even if only subliminally--to be the old world with which we are familiar, the old world of our prehistory, or of our youthful development, of our culture's myths, or at least of other narratives" (13). The Beginning Place creates a world that is unique, yet richly resonant with archetypal characters and situations. One of its most perceptive critics, Charlotte Spivack, observes that "its deeper implications may well elude the casual reader. The double style, although suited to the subject of parallel worlds, may alienate readers who prefer their fantasy and realism straight" (123). Perhaps this multifaceted work is being dismissed as a low-key adventure story precisely because it transcends allegory so well. As Spivack explains, "There is no one-to-one identification of one object with a specific meaning. The obviously symbolic adventures are not explained in terms of easy equations" (124).

In an essay entitled "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," Le Guin herself has affirmed that "Any creation, primary or secondary, with any vitality to it can 'really' be a dozen mutually exclusive things at once, before breakfast" (53). She has also mentioned that she never again "consciously borrowed" specific myths as she had in Rocannon's World, "although obviously unconscious residues appear. . . . Later on, a critic may get a look at what I've come up with and point out some parallels and explanations, and I say, Oh, that's what I was doing" ("Interview" 156). These statements are reassuring to anyone venturing to offer a new interpretation of her work.

Embarking upon the dangerous waters of reader-response criticism is a risky enterprise, to be undertaken only with close attention to textual details and without claiming to uncover the author's conscious intentions. Recognizing that Le Guin describes herself as a "congenital non-Christian" complicates matters even more ("Dreams" 55). However, I knew nothing of the author in 1980, when I was an exhausted young wife and mother with two toddlers, the restless memories of two degrees, very little income, and a future consisting of a large question mark. Thus I did not willfully impose an interpretation on the novel that differed from the author's philosophy. Rather, The Beginning Place was something that happened to me--in the author's phrase, a dream that seemed to explain itself.

By coincidence or not, the name Irena recalls the name of the young heroine of another fantasy, George MacDonald's The Princess and the Goblin. As described earlier, MacDonald was startlingly modern in his use of Princess Irene's mysterious great-great grandmother as a female image of God, yet he succeeded in creating a story so compelling that some children can read it without ever divining the religious symbolism permeating the tale. The Beginning Place immediately struck me as being another such intricately symbolic fantasy. The harshly realistic setting in the outer world of the story provokes the questions: What is there in the real society surrounding us that parallels the beginning place in this novel? Where can one turn in desperation from difficulties like those that Hugh and Irena face in their homes? Perhaps the text itself suggests answers through its symbolism--and a critique of the answers as well.

When Hugh Rogers first discovers "the beginning place" where the stream of water runs over the rocks, he drinks from its refreshing coolness and remains kneeling "in that intensity which he understood as prayer" (7). His early visits to the hidden glade motivate him to take up running and lose some weight, and, more important, to revive his dream of obtaining the financial means to enter college. For some reason he cannot fully articulate, "Entire trust and confidence" take possession of him in this place (27). Irena expresses the influence of the spot more directly. Often she celebrates her

entry into it with a ritual dance, for which her everyday self feels a little "silly. The things people did in church were silly too. There were reasons for doing them" (30). Like Hugh, she feels the beginning place is her true home. All the imagery of these early scenes suggests religious significance. The great irony, of course, is that churches in the outer world frequently fail to recreate such awareness of the sacred, which is one reason many people seek it in natural beauty--as Emily Dickinson speaks of keeping the Sabbath "With a bobolink for a chorister / And an orchard for a dome" (#324).

It must be remembered that the beginning place is the glade in the forest, and not the village, which harbors some of the same hierarchies, jealousies, conflicts and fears that can be found in the outer world in any human institution. The titles of the village leaders are both familiar epithets for the Christian God, but there is a great difference between their characters. It seems an amusing irony that the Master is the active political leader, whereas Irena never quite understands the exact position or function of the Lord. Many a church is in a precisely analogous situation, wherein the minister or priest is the obvious leader, while the Divine Being is a titled figure whose powers remain unclearly defined. Naturally enough, it is the Lord who gives all the encouragement and useful advice to the fatherless Hugh and Irena, who feel themselves regarded as his children. For example, although nothing in the twilight land can change the hard life of her mother,

Irena's distress is lightened by Lord Horn's wisdom: "You will not force your mother to make the choice she cannot make; you will not ask for help she cannot give. You don't need help. Your courage is beyond praise" (122).

Irena, whose name means peace, has gone out from her mother Mary to be about her spiritual father's business, very like the young Jesus of Luke 2.

"Go without looking back, my daughter," Lord Horn tells her, echoing Christ's warning "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" ( Luke 9:62).

In contrast, a close reading reveals an alarmingly sinister side to the Master. As Susan McLean points out, Master Sark seems to feel that the only hope for the village is to placate some evil being with a sacrificial scapegoat, as his grandfather had done (135). When he tries to set out for the hills with Irena, he evidently intends her for that role, but he becomes too frightened to persevere. As she bids him her final farewell, Irena addresses the Master by his given name for the first time, instead of his title, suggesting her loss of respect for him. On their long journey, she and Hugh eventually find a flat rock with four rusty iron rings set in it and quickly leave the spot, guessing its function. The Master's views precisely parallel the scapegoat or substitutionary theory of Christ's atonement; Le Guin has elsewhere dramatized her criticism of this theory, notably in the short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." <sup>3</sup>

Irena's parting conversation with the Lord is very different:

"There is more than one road to the City."

"Were you ever there?"

He looked at her with his grey, distant gaze.

"I have been to the City. That is why I am called lord, because I have been there." he said, kind and cold and calm.

"Did you see the King?"

"The shadow," Horn said, "I saw the bright shadow of the King," but the word was feminine so that it must mean the Queen or the Mother. . . . His eyes that looked always from a distance were on hers. If I reach out my hand and touch him I will see clearly, she thought. . . .

Horn's grey eyes said gently, Do not touch me, child.

(123)

A purely literal reading would be hard put to explain why the royal city of that land would be so little visited. Lord Horn implies that he has made the journey once, and now it is necessary for others to undertake it for themselves. However, they can succeed in their quest only if they are armed with his sword. The saying "Do not touch me," is the same spoken by Christ to Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel. There could hardly be a better

symbolic expression of the "Christus Victor" theory of the atonement, favored by the early Celtic Church before it was controlled by Rome--and currently attractive to twentieth-century Christian feminists, although Le Guin may be unfamiliar with it. In this view, instead of God the Father playing the part of a bloodthirsty judge, it is Satan (logically enough) that is the enemy. Christ battles with the forces of evil and ultimately triumphs in the Resurrection. Nevertheless, evil still obviously remains to be grappled with in human life, just as Hugh and Irena must confront the dragon. It would be symbolically fitting to assume the dragon's lameness is the result of its earlier encounter with Lord Horn; in folk tradition the devil is reputed to be lame because of his original fall from heaven. Hugh's near-death and his terrible scars also seem symbolically significant. When Irena uncovers the great bruise on his side, she exclaims, "My God," the simple verbal equivalent of crossing oneself, but also the response of the apostle Thomas upon seeing the scars of the risen Christ. Hugh himself made the same exclamation, with possible double meaning, when he first received the sword from Lord Horn.

George MacDonald would doubtless have approved of the ambiguous gender of the City's royalty. Hugh and Irena are both made in the royal image, but also in the image of the dragon. Hugh sees it as male, and by killing it he rejects the part of himself that could become like Irena's

stepfather. Irena, who sees it as female, must likewise reject her potential to become a woman like Hugh's mother. The two cannot control their relatives, but they do have control over their own behavior. By facing their own destructive potential, they are ready to begin a mature relationship.

The union of Hugh and Irena without benefit of clergy reflects the increasingly common view of the 1960s and 1970s that marriage is a personal commitment which a ceremony can acknowledge but not create. "Before the cave of the dragon we were married," Hugh thinks as he staggers behind Irena through the last of the forest into the beginning place, which is "the end, now." He recognizes "the pine and the high laurels, but no way between them, not till her hand opened it for him. But still he could not go through it till she took his hand and came beside him into the new world" (178). Collapsing on the threshold, he awakens in the hospital bed to begin a new life with Irena.

Le Guin's novel celebrates marriage as a relationship not of master and maid or knight and lady, but of friends, lovers, and equals. Such a relationship is always rooted in the beginning place, a place of romance transcending tragedy, where the Superman in every Clark Kent is recognized, or perhaps Clark Kent is the real Superman. Woolf's angel in the house and Olsen's essential angel are transcended as Irena and Hugh



together become savior-figures, retaining the red cloak of their royal heritage.

"It is royalty that calls each other sister, brother" (180).

In a setting more realistic than that of "The Twelve Brothers," Le Guin's tale unerringly conflates the figures of brother and husband. The young king of the folktale was, so to speak, the sister's reward for her heroism, much like the princess who often serves as reward for male protagonists. In The Beginning Place, the two lovers are also figuratively brother and sister, the Lord's spiritual children who save one another in their quest that inexplicably benefits an entire community as well.

Emily Dickinson's enigmatic Master letters and poems are expressions of an unsatisfied yearning like Irena's misplaced idolization of the Master of Tembreabrazi. Yet the poet's almost infinite versatility also comprehends the mystery of fulfillment, as in Poem #909--which might well stand as Irena's postscript to The Beginning Place. Here the speaker deliberately borrows the all-too-familiar language of hierarchy--only to cancel it with an affirmation of equality:

I make His Crescent fill or lack--

His Nature is at Full

Or Quarter--as I signify--

His Tides do I control--

He holds superior in the Sky  
 Or gropes, at my Command  
 Behind inferior Clouds--or round  
 A Mist's slow Colonnade--

But since We hold a Mutual Disc--  
 And front a Mutual Day--  
 Which is the Despot, neither knows--  
 Nor Whose--the Tyranny--

### Conclusion

In their diverse circumstances, all the twentieth-century heroines considered here embody the same qualities of courage, love, and independence that characterize the sister of "The Twelve Brothers." Like their prototype, they risk misunderstanding, ridicule, and in some cases physical danger as they pursue their chosen quests, in the tradition of the "black bride" contrasted by Northrop Frye with the "white goddess," as described in Chapter Two of this study. All of the works just examined reflect their creators' attitudes of resistance to authoritarianism, respect for the physical and material dimensions of human life, and affirmation of the equality of men and women--the same attitudes, as we have seen, that

Leonard Swidler identifies as characteristic of early Christianity but much less visible in later religious tradition.

Thus, it has been established that the presence of themes consistent with Christianity and feminism is not in fact dependent on a particular author's formal connection (or lack thereof) to institutional religion, no matter whether the contrary "should" be true according to some arbitrary standard. By the same token, certain affinities of these authors with Emily Dickinson need not depend exclusively on their actual familiarity with her work. In the context of this entire study, the analysis of twentieth-century writers serves to emphasize the immense potential of literature to shape and reflect culture, as well as to transform individual lives. For the miner's child D. H. Lawrence or the immigrants' daughter Tillie Olsen, the passion for reading opened up new worlds transcending the struggles of daily existence. As Dickinson observes in Poem #1263,

This traverse may the poorest take  
 Without oppress of toll  
 How frugal is the chariot  
 That bears a human soul!

Similarly, in a passage fully cited earlier, Virginia Woolf declares that "one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background . . . conceptions" or measuring

rods invisible to others, formed within the imagination ("A Sketch of the Past" 73). For her too, reading played a crucial part in forming these intangible resources.

The subversive power of literature to encourage transformation of the self and the society may help to account for the very mixed reception of the authors under consideration. Like Dickinson and like the "sisters in search" they created, they have been vigorously rejected by some, yet ultimately admired by others. Woolf has been patronized for her feminist philosophy and her long struggle with mental illness; Lawrence has been rejected for his eroticism or, alternatively, for his puritanism; Wilder discounted for being a professing Christian and thus regarded as a didactic optimist; Gaines and Olsen for constituting part of the multicultural subject matter so appalling to certain educators, and Le Guin for the appeal of her fantasy and science fiction within popular culture. For the most part, these objections are ironically inconsistent with the ideal of "art for art's sake" often professed by the same kinds of critics. Just as the self Emily Dickinson chose to become is as real as the aggregate of biographical facts to be found after her name in a reference volume, the parallel worlds created by literary artists are as real as their influence upon readers, who may be inspired to embark upon their own "slant" revolutions in the external world.

The greatly expanded availability of past and present literature has somewhat reduced the need to reinvent visions that so rightly disturbs historian Gerda Lerner. For example, though we may regret the likelihood that Woolf or Lawrence never read Emily Dickinson, we can observe the influence of other texts that they knew in common. For the purposes of this study, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are the foremost of these texts, supplemented by the plays of Shakespeare and several major nineteenth-century novels. Of course, the influences of various nineteenth-century novelists upon Dickinson, Lawrence, and Woolf are already receiving much critical attention. As for the other twentieth-century writers discussed here, they too would have shared a common familiarity with much of the earlier literature considered here, as well as with Dickinson's poetry. The possibility that women can be strong and admirable human beings is doubtless one among many concepts that have been transmitted through literature, even though they may not be openly acknowledged in other social contexts at any given point in time.

## Notes

1. In Psalm 139:8-10, the speaker addresses God thus:

If I ascend unto heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell,  
behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost  
parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall  
hold me.

Romans 8:39 similarly affirms that neither "height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

2. Some of Dickinson's poems had been published in England before Lawrence's death, but, as noted earlier, they were as yet less well received than in the United States. It is also true that Lawrence spent some time in America, but mostly in the Southwest. Burwell's catalog lists all Lawrence's written references to his reading, in all genres, but neither she nor Siegel nor anyone else to my knowledge has uncovered any evidence that he was familiar with Emily Dickinson.
3. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" portrays a utopian community that mysteriously depends upon the permanent suffering of a mute imprisoned child. Le Guin celebrates those courageous individuals who refuse to enjoy their lives at such an expense and thus choose to leave their homeland. The story seems to allude to the scapegoat theory of Christ's sacrifice. However, the child scapegoat does not harmonize with the "Christus Victor" interpretation of Christ's mission, or with contemporary liberationist Christianity. Neither is the suffering child comparable to the sister of "The Twelve Brothers" who freely chooses to seek and save her brothers and to remain silent for a specifically limited period of time. Ironically, those who walk away from Omelas are the real saviors, or at least the author's symbols of hope for a more just society. They are the ones who resemble the sister, leaving their homeland rather than benefit from another's misfortune.

## CHAPTER SIX

## CODA: "THE RIVET IN THE BANDS"

If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

Matt. 17:20

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith  
On which so vast depends--  
Lest Firmament should fail for me--  
The Rivet in the Bands

Dickinson, #766

Because the story of our life  
becomes our life

Because each of us tells  
the same story  
but tells it differently

and none of us tells it  
the same way twice

.....

and though we listen only  
haphazardly, with one ear,  
we will begin our story  
with the word and

Lisel Mueller, "Why We Tell Stories"

The tradition of Christlike women in literature provides a context that is essential for the full understanding of feminism's cultural roots--not to mention the greater understanding of numerous literary texts. Emily Dickinson's affinities with the tradition, as set forth in this study, appear to

reflect a complex intertwining of reading and writing as the simultaneous nourishment and expression of a profoundly integrated life. In light of the inexhaustible legacy of that life, the potential psychological and cultural influence of all literature is an issue meriting perennial reconsideration.

That reconsideration, by definition, must lie for the most part beyond the scope of this study, which paradoxically seeks to increase appreciation for Emily Dickinson, not so much for the "farness" and "foreignhood" of her "individual Voice" (Poem #719) as for being "the articulate inarticulate," as Samuel G. Ward put it in his perceptive letter to Higginson soon after Dickinson's poems were first published (qtd. in Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades 170) A prominent banker rather than a professional man of letters, Ward nonetheless recognized Dickinson as a sister in spirit. His enthusiastic response to Dickinson's poems testifies to the authenticity of her expression of emotions and experiences shared by many of her contemporaries-- especially those who also shared the "awfully high, but awfully lonesome" New England Puritan heritage (Ward, qtd. in Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades 169).

On the assumption that women's studies are inextricably part of cultural studies, the religious roots of female heroism (explored in Chapter I) deserve further attention from critics interested in positive images of women in literature. The Bible is important to this issue both because of its



narratives and metaphors that affirm women and because of its status as a culturally acceptable repository of such affirmations. Furthermore, in the Protestant tradition familiar to Dickinson and several other writers included here, as we have seen, the biblical texts are--at least in theory--respected above any other source of authority, resulting in great emphasis on the importance of literacy and on the individual's responsibility to interpret carefully what he or she reads. The right of individual interpretation has thus been frequently invoked in support of social reform movements that have benefited women and other disadvantaged groups.

The story of the silent sister who pursues her chosen mission even to the extent of risking her life is significant as an example of a subversive oral tradition celebrating female heroism that is consistent with a feminist interpretation of Christianity but not obviously traceable to a religious source. The silent sister in search of justice and integrity thus provides a valuable alternative prototype for the literary heroines who may otherwise be identified as Christlike, since their virtues cannot be assumed to represent exclusively Christian values.

As we have seen, the first French woman of letters, Christine de Pisan, contrived to assemble an extensive compendium of admirable women by drawing upon a wide variety of sources, Christian and classical, oral and written, legendary and historical. The fact that she managed to do so in the

fifteenth century, as well as the popularity of her books, indicates that the spirit of feminist consciousness is far older than many realize and that literature has long been a significant means of its transmission.

Similarly, Shakespeare, the most firmly established writer in the canon of English literature, continues to impress us with his creative transformation of materials distilled from Christian tradition, classical literature, folklore, history, and his lesser known contemporaries. The breadth of his imaginative experience unquestionably enhanced his positive portraits of women, which in turn have inspired not only later writers and literary critics, but also countless unknown readers. As recounted earlier, in the discussion of Aurora Leigh, the young women entering an essay contest sponsored by a Victorian periodical known as the Girls' Own Paper startled their elders by their admiration of Portia and other active Shakespearean heroines--as well as by the excellent quality of their essays (Lootens 104). This anecdote is extremely significant in that it reflects the girls' intellectual independence; their personal definitions of admirable womanhood were apparently not restricted by the expectations of patriarchal authority figures.

In daily life, admittedly, many of these young women may have felt obliged to adopt "strategies of reticence" such as Joanne Dobson observes among nineteenth-century women writers. However, it appears that literary works such as those examined throughout this study have long reflected and

shaped the beliefs and dreams of women, even if their external existence could not be in harmony with their inner lives. Emily Dickinson's poetry may be symbolized by the priceless "attar of roses," to reiterate Higginson's metaphor for great literature, but it is the distillation of "a million blossoms" ("Letter to a Young Contributor" 91). As Barbara Sicherman concludes from her study of women's reading in late Victorian American culture,

Reading provided space--physical, temporal, and psychological--that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation. The freedom of imagination women found in books encouraged new self-definitions and, ultimately, . . . innovative behavior. (202)

It is true that much prescriptive literature of the nineteenth century exalted the "cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity," as described in Barbara Welter's famous essay on "The Cult of True Womanhood" (44), but this ideal of womanhood was clearly not monolithic. It is also true that religion was often invoked to promote these virtues, and that evangelical Christians were sometimes suspicious of secular literature lest it undermine the influence of the Bible. Nevertheless, the centrality of the Bible in evangelical Protestantism also contributed to at least one intellectually liberating effect: it encouraged men and women alike to realize

that the words and actions of people in distant times and places can be of great relevance to one's life--or, conversely, that one's own culture's assumptions and practices are not necessarily the only or best possible ones. Once this realization is attained (which remains all too seldom at the dawn of the twenty-first century, as many educators can testify), the reading of all creative literature has increased potential to transform individuals and their society.

Thus, it may not be surprising that several of the texts portraying Christlike heroines explicitly present books and reading as highly significant in human life. Notable examples are The Minister's Wooing, Aurora Leigh, To the Lighthouse, and The Bridge of San Luis Rey. Also, in Le Guin's The Beginning Place, the husky gentle hero's dream of becoming a librarian seems symbolically fitting for a man who is willing to serve others and slay the destructive dragon within himself.

In The Beginning Place, and in Lawrence's The Man Who Died, we see the presence of two heroes, male and female, metaphorically made in the divine image, as if fulfilling Woolf's vision of a world where both men and women find the way to the Lighthouse. Another slow development observed through the literature has been the recognition of mothers as potential heroes to be imitated rather than as angels to be revered for relieving everyone else of their responsibilities to one another in the human community. Much work

remains to be done to further our understanding of the complex nature of heroism in literature and its relation to heroism in writers and readers, especially in the realm of reception studies. The interaction of other cultural factors (such as religion, race, ethnicity, and class) with gender relationships and roles also merits more attention, to encourage the mainstreaming of women's studies and to help feminists avoid falling into ahistorical and ineffective polemic. For example, much insight might be gained from a comparison of Eliot's Middlemarch with Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, or of some of Dickinson's poems with those of Denise Levertov.

For the moment, a final comparison may be made between Emily Dickinson and Ursula K. LeGuin, whose poetry has been regrettably neglected amid the popularity of her many novels. A lengthy essay might profitably be devoted to the corresponding images and themes found in her poem "Coming of Age" and in The Beginning Place. Part VI of the former evokes the twilight land of the latter:

We have learned how to make  
the sun set. . . .  
This is the month when things fall  
and it has no name  
nor daylight.

We have not learned exactly how to make the sun rise, yet.

Oh Lord, this is a hard world for atheists. . . .

If you will not keep up the world, Lord,

I will. (284-85)

The speaker calls herself an "exile, and at home," a phrase which might equally be applied to the sister of the twelve brothers, or to Emily Dickinson. Both were voluntary exiles from a life that many would consider normal, and each sought out the conditions required for her own definition of home.

Le Guin's persona has not yet managed the hard task of making the sun rise in a dim land, perhaps the task of poetry and by extension of all literature. With characteristic audacity, Dickinson makes grander claims:

I reckon--when I count at all--

First--Poets--Then the Sun--

Then Summer--Then the Heaven of God--

And then--the List is done--

But, looking back, the First so seems

To Comprehend the Whole--

The Others look a needless Show--

So I write--Poets--All--

(#569)

In this poem, the speaker might be seen as challenging religious tradition in the same spirit as Le Guin's in "Coming of Age." However, part of Emily Dickinson's genius lies in her extraordinary talent for articulating contradictory possibilities. Poem #766 grounds its similarly audacious claims in faith, implying the existence of something even greater than the speaker's cosmic powers:

My Faith is larger than the Hills--

So when the Hills decay--

My Faith must take the Purple Wheel

To show the Sun the way--

'Tis first He steps upon the Vane--

And then--upon the Hill--

And then abroad the World He go

To do His Golden Will--

And if His Yellow feet should miss--

The Bird would not arise--

The Flowers would slumber on their Stems--

No Bells have Paradise--

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith  
On which so vast depends--  
Lest Firmament should fail for me--  
The Rivet in the Bands

The poet, then, is the rivet in the bands, the one who learns to make the sun rise. By seeing herself, however dimly, within a centuries-old tradition that would stretch beyond her into the unknown future, Emily Dickinson was empowered to transcribe her "Bulletins . . . / From Immortality" (Poem #827). The task left her little time to waste on the world's distinctions between sacred and secular, host and guest, Jew and Greek, or male and female.



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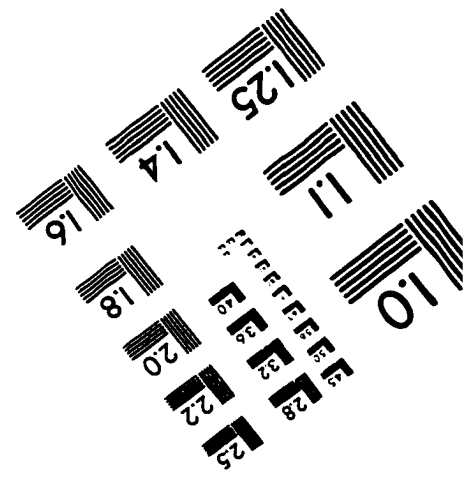
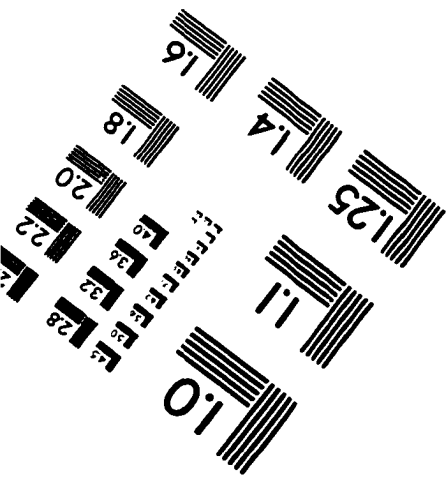
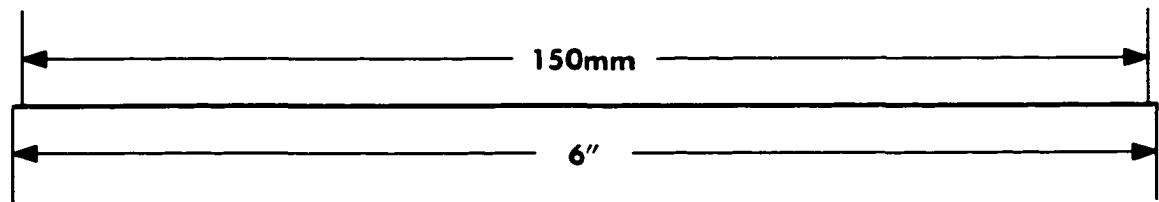
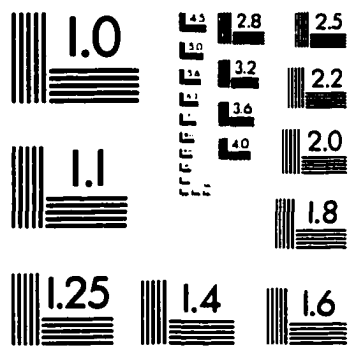
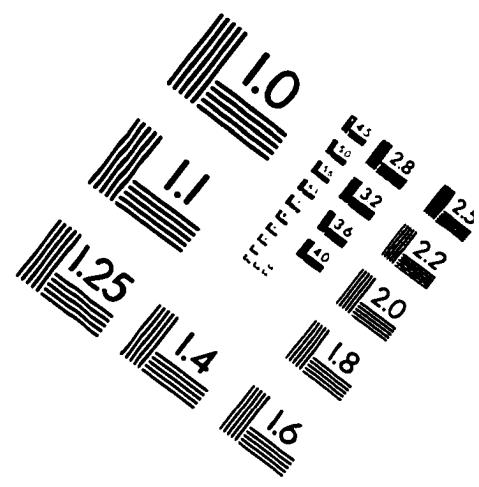
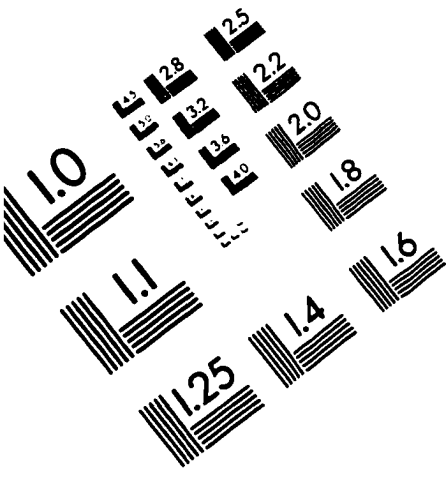
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