

The Woman/Poet Wife: Emily Dickinson and the Influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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Abstract

The influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on Emily Dickinson's poetry has been the subject of much speculation. The thematic similarities between the poetry of these two women and, sometimes, the use of similar or exact words have led some critics to accuse Dickinson of plagiarism. This paper considers this accusation in terms of Harold Bloom's idea of the "anxiety of influence" to show how Barrett Browning inspired Dickinson to become at once a part of a strong female tradition as well as a deviant. The image of the wife as presented by Dickinson in her "bridal" poems has been compared with that presented in Barrett Browning's famous "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence, written for her husband, has been valued more for the romance behind the poems than for their literary value. These poems have ultimately placed Barrett Browning securely in the place of woman/wife rather than poet. But where Barrett Browning never questioned the overlapping of these roles, Dickinson, in her poetry, is often troubled by the implications. This paper examines Dickinson's poems as an assertion of the conflicts between the woman/poet/wife compared to Barrett Browning's poetry which shows her complacency with her position as woman/wife as she had already established herself as a poet in the man's world before she ever met Robert Browning.

Emily Dickinson first refers to Barrett Browning in a letter possibly written in 1861 to the Norcross sisters (L234), in which she equates the poet with George Sand and calls them both "queens." She also lists Barrett Browning as one of her frequently read poets in her answer to T.W. Higginson's inquiry about

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her reading habits (L261). In 1862, Dickinson writes thus to Samuel Bowles who was in England at the time: “Should anybody where you go, talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us — and if you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head, for me — her unmentioned mourner —” (L266). For Dickinson, Barrett Browning provided a viable role model as a woman who had apparently been able to reconcile the multiple roles of woman, wife, and poet. (In fact, she was a better known poet at the time than her husband, Robert Browning.) Although she never married, Dickinson was deeply concerned with the effects of marriage and the often circumscribing role of a wife. Barrett Browning, thus, represented something of an ideal, and it is to her that Dickinson refers most often in her letters. A significant portion of Dickinson’s enormous output of poems focuses on marriage or uses the image of a bride or wife that portrays her concerns regarding the relations of the sexes.

In an attempt to understand how Barrett Browning as woman/poet/wife inspired Dickinson to become part of a strong female tradition, this paper closely examines the overall influences of the former on the latter’s poetry. The image of the wife as presented by Dickinson in her “bridal” poems has been compared with that presented in Barrett Browning’s famous “Sonnets from the Portuguese.” Interestingly, Barrett Browning’s sonnet sequence, written for her husband, has been valued more for the romance behind the poems than for their literary value. These poems have ultimately placed Barrett Browning securely in the place of woman/wife rather than poet. But where Barrett Browning never questioned the overlapping of these roles, Dickinson, in her poetry, is often troubled by the implications.

The Influence of Barrett Browning on the Poetry of Dickinson

It would appear that only after her death did Barrett Browning actually begin to influence Dickinson as there is no mention of the poet in Dickinson’s letters before that time. As Gary Lee Stonum observes, “It seems likely, in other words, that Browning’s death precipitated a change, or at least a marked increase, in the appeal she held for Dickinson. The American poet had no doubt been reading Browning’s poetry over a period of years, but only in death did the English poet assume a central place in her imagination” (40). This would seem to be true as the two years following Barrett Browning’s death were the most productive period of Dickinson’s literary career. Stonum, however, thinks that though Dickinson was familiar with the works of Barrett Browning, the latter actually had very little influence on Dickinson’s writings in general. He opines that the attempt by many critics to find marks of similarities between the writings of the two poets is ridiculous and that any similarity that may be found is either slight or may be attributed to “poetic commonplaces” (Stonum 45). In other words, it is typical to find certain ideas recurring in the works of different writers over the generations simply because of their profundity.

One of these critics that Stonum may have been referring to, but does not list in his bibliography, is John E. Walsh. Walsh, in an obsessive manner, in his book *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson*, proceeds to identify passages in Dickinson, which, according to him, were direct plagiarisms of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. In the appendix, he includes a complete list of Dickinson's references ("borrowings," as he calls them) to *Aurora Leigh*. Interestingly, a comparison of the passages he identifies in Dickinson as having been "borrowed" from Barrett Browning shows that there is not enough similarity between them to warrant the libel of plagiarism. For instance:

I, writing thus, am still what men call young;
I have not so far left the coasts of life
To travel inland, that I cannot hear
That murmur of the outer Infinite... (Aurora Leigh 1.9-12)

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity – (Dickinson P76)

Parts of Dickinson's poems may perhaps, on occasion, have some of the exact words or similar ideas used by Barrett Browning in a certain passage in her book, but this can hardly be deemed plagiarism since ideas have always been borrowed by writers from their predecessors. As T. S. Eliot would have it, an individual writer must acquire a "historical sense" and an awareness of "not only the pastness of the past, but also of its presence" before becoming an "individual talent" (37). It is what Harold Bloom later identifies as the "anxiety of influence."

Dickinson's admiration for Barrett Browning is evident from the fact that she actually had a picture of the poet hanging on her bedroom wall alongside George Eliot's and Thomas Carlyle's (Eberwein 36). She was also extremely grief-stricken at Barrett Browning's death and wrote at least three poems in her memory. When Robert Browning's *Dramatis Personae* appeared in 1864, she was incredulous at his being able to write after suffering such a great loss: "I noticed Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished – till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps" (L298). She had, indeed, sung "off charnel steps" in Poem 312 ("Her-last Poems—"). Mourning the loss of Barrett Browning, Dickinson says it is meaningless to praise her since the poet's head is "too High to Crown –." She wonders, at the end of the poem, about how great the poet's husband's grief must be, seeing that she and others, who are "No Poet's Kinsman –," feel so sad.

Poem 593 ("I think I was enchanted") is another of Dickinson's tributes to Barrett Browning. Here she refers to a "Conversion of the Mind" which she could not define, but which felt "Like Sanctifying in the Soul—." Walsh attributes this to her reading of *Aurora Leigh* (92). Apparently, *Aurora Leigh* had had a profound effect on her, so

much so, that she could not decide “whether it was noon at night—/Or only Heaven—at Noon—/For very Lunacy of Light/I had not power to tell—” (P593). Walsh also says that it was about this time that Dickinson not only hung a picture of Barrett Browning on her bedroom wall but also began to imitate her hairstyle. He attempts to prove, too, that Dickinson’s handwriting also changed in this period as Romney’s handwriting did in *Aurora Leigh* as described by Barrett Browning.

The third poem in which Dickinson pays homage to Barrett Browning is Poem 363 (“I went to thank Her—”). It is well known that Dickinson uses uppercase letters in odd places, but the use of an uppercase letter for the word ‘her’ in the first line of this poem, and for others within it, indicates the pedestal on which Dickinson had evidently placed Barrett Browning. The poem sounds like a regret for her inability to meet her idealized poet. It is possibly true, as Walsh believes, that this poem was written when Dickinson heard of the death of her favorite poet and so could not send her a letter of gratitude that she had probably written after the first publication of one of her poems in 1860.

Apart from the three poems of tribute, Dickinson also wrote other poems which reveal the influence of Barrett Browning. Eberwein thinks that Poem 199 was influenced by Sonnets 13 and 27 from “Sonnets from the Portuguese” (Eberwein 35), while Walsh finds several poems (sixty-two, to be exact), some of whose lines contain not only similar ideas, but are, in fact, “plagiarisms” of *Aurora Leigh*. As discussed above, this is going a bit too far as ideas among writers have always been transmitted over generations. Walsh seems to be okay with Shakespeare and Coleridge borrowing ideas from their predecessors, while he renders his reservation against Dickinson doing the same. “Strong” poets, according to Bloom’s second ratio, *tessera*, must create a link between a precursor’s and his or her own poetry, the purpose of which is to “complete the otherwise ‘truncated’ precursor poem and poet” (66). Shakespeare and Coleridge forge this connection and are unanimously considered “strong” poets. But Dickinson is also well-established as a “strong poet,” leaving no doubt that her poetry is the link between her literary past and present, and therefore, there was no reason for her to plagiarize from Barrett Browning. Walsh, however, thinks her case is different, though it is not clear why he thinks this except perhaps that the sheer number of her poems exceeded both Shakespeare’s and Coleridge’s:

But what if Emily’s case turns out to be not so ordinary? What if she frequently did not just *pilfer* lines and images for inclusion in some original setting of her own, but regularly squeezed and stretched her borrowings as she molded dough for bread? And what if the number of poems so derived should begin — as it has begun — to mount into the hundreds? What then? (Walsh, 121 [My emphasis])

Walsh is perhaps overreacting, and Dickinson deserves more credit than being labeled a common thief. It should be noted that, in this passage, he derogates not only her poetic ability but her status as a woman as well when he makes fun of her

baking bread. It becomes imperative then to discuss the overlapping roles of the woman and the poet.

The Woman/Poet/Wife

Even though she remained unmarried, Dickinson certainly belonged to a literary tradition where the figure of the woman-poet is seen in conflict with her domestic role as wife. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar as well as Cheryl Walker have examined this issue at great length. As Gilbert and Gubar put it,

Like Barrett Browning, whose poetry she [Dickinson] much admired, she seems at first to have assuaged the guilt verse-writing aroused by transforming Romantic poetic self-assertion into an aesthetic of female service modeled on Victorian marriage. Certainly something like the relationship between a masterful husband and a self-abnegating wife appears to be at the heart of much of her poetry, where it is also pictured, variously, as the encounter of lover and mistress, king and queen. (586)

Dickinson's poetry certainly offers pictures of the "female double life" (Gilbert and Gubar 590), although she herself never fulfilled the role of a wife, and therefore, did not have to practically juggle the roles of wife and poet.

Among the "bridal" poems, tensions can be detected, sometimes directly, sometimes not, between the wife and the woman/poet. This, according to Paul Crumbley, was not because Dickinson was averse to men, but was, rather, interested in "analyzing, interrogating, and exposing assumptions she believed contrary to her own best interests as a woman" (124). The issue of marriage and its circumscribing effect thus crops up frequently in Dickinson's poetry.

In a letter to Susan Gilbert, her sister-in-law, Dickinson voices her concern about the fate of a "wife" as opposed to the "bride":

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but – dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace – they know that the man of noon, is mightier than the morning, and their life is henceforth to him. (Johnson L93)

It is evident from the above extract that Dickinson was concerned about how women were dependent on men for their happiness even though they were, more often than not, cowed down by the physical and mental strengths of the men.

Dickinson came from a home where education and enrichment of the mind were encouraged. Her father, Edward Dickinson, “continually stimulated his children’s interest in contemporary as well as classical reading by his admonitions regarding their choice of authors” (Capps 13). It is remarkable to note, though, that Edward Dickinson bought them books but would tell the children not to read them as they may “joggle the Mind” (L261). Critics are not quite sure why he would do something like this but, though he forbade them to read certain books, he did not remove them from the children’s vicinity, and Dickinson read whatever she could lay her hands on. The poet had also studied at the co-educational Amherst Academy and later went on to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. This is evidence enough to show that Dickinson hardly led the life of a Victorian woman commonly thought to have been denied the opportunities of improving her mind. And yet, as Helen McNeil puts it, “The social definition of gender role reaches inside the poem. As a woman writer, Dickinson partakes of this larger difference as much as any of her sisters. This is the case despite her considerable cultural advantages” (38).

Certain of Dickinson’s poems undoubtedly question the conventional role of the woman. Dickinson was most concerned with the role of a wife, it seems, as this recurs frequently in her poems. She herself had, around the mid-1860s, started wearing white dresses and remaining within the confines of her home by choice. She never married, but the white dresses she wore have signified to critics an assumption of the bride role on her part, although no one is quite sure why she chose to assume such a figure. To Dickinson, it was “Mine – by the Right of the White Election!” (P528). The word “Election” here seems to signify that Dickinson was asserting her right to choose.

Dickinson’s first wife/bride poem, Poem 199, was possibly written in 1860. Here, she looks back at her existence as a girl and appears to feel that her existence as a “wife” is “comfort,” and therefore the past state must have been “pain.” The poem begins with denial – she is no longer “wife,” but has been transformed into a “Czar,” has become a “Woman.” Such a beginning would seem to anticipate a rebellious tone for the rest of the poem, or an elaboration on how her status as a “woman” has uplifted her. Instead, we see a comparison with her girlhood, with a gradual shift towards a complacency or satisfaction with the “wife” role. This would fit into the description Gilbert and Gubar give of her poetry – that they feature unequal relationships between the male and the female. The final line, however, denies this complacency with “I’m ‘Wife’! Stop there!” as if the poet no longer wants to think of her actual state, that she had been temporarily lulled into a false sense of security. Indeed, the transition from “wife” to “Wife” signals the poet’s coming into her own, against all odds. As Lucia Aiello says in her essay, “Mimesis and Poiesis,” in response to Gilbert and Gubar, the words “Woman,” “Czar,” and “Girl” show

an internal movement that discloses the multiple potential of these words. In this perspective, the simple binary that Gilbert and Gubar construct around

the two concepts of renunciation and self-assertion is complicated by the possibility of inversion of traditional hierarchies and established power relationships. (246)

In other words, the use of the uppercase W in “Wife” turns the “established power relationships” on its head and reasserts the strength of the woman-poet.

Barrett Browning, in speaking of a similar situation, in “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” adopts a completely opposite tone. In describing her acceptance of her lover’s love, she says “... In lifting upward, as in crushing low!/And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword/To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,--/Even so, Beloved, I at last record,/Here ends my strife” (Sonnet XVI). Curiously though, Barrett Browning uses martial imagery to describe her surrender. In a clever manner, therefore, she manages to fuse the role of the conquered maiden with the more masculine image of a soldier. In doing so, she not only allows her beloved to retain his sense of superiority as male, but puts herself into a more assertive position. She, therefore, is able to reach a compromise between the two partners in the story: between herself as female beloved and her male lover. Dickinson’s Poem 199 shows no sign of such an understanding – in fact, the male lover/husband is absent from the poem and only the female ‘wife’ struggles for some sort of meaning to her status.

Before going further, I would like to look at Barrett Browning’s use of the sonnet form. Written in the conventional Renaissance mode, Barrett Browning’s Sonnets I through XVI express the poet’s doubts as she longs to accept the love offered, but is too aware of her own shortcomings to do so. And though she uses the sonnet form, a popular Renaissance convention, Barrett Browning’s poems are different because they are addressed to an achievable lover of whom she feels unworthy. Usually, in the Renaissance sonnets, the beloved is unreachable but the poet, even knowing this, continues to exert his poetic faculties in her praise. For Barrett Browning, the “Sonnets” represented something more real. They articulated her uncertainties and reservations because she felt unworthy, but, simultaneously, they expressed her gratitude for being loved.

Barrett Browning’s sonnets also differ from her literary predecessors as she forays into a realm traditionally regarded as men’s. She places herself in the position of the male lover, the conventional speaker in such poems. However, the speaker in the “Sonnets” seems too conscious of her gender and sounds subservient at all times. In spite of this, she must be acknowledged for reversing the roles and actually addressing her beloved. According to Dorothy Mermin though, this is the speaker’s adoption of a double role – of the lover and the beloved: “This is not a reversal of roles, but a doubling of them. There are two poets in the poem, [the writer herself, and Robert Browning to whom she is addressing the poems] and two poets’ beloveds, and its project is the utopian one of replacing hierarchy by equality” (130). Angela Leigh ton is on the same page as Mermin and says that it is a strategy used by Barrett Browning to give herself a voice, while simultaneously retaining her

beloved's masculinity by always referring to herself as the inferior: "Unwilling to portray Robert as a desirable object, Elizabeth Barrett Browning plays at being both subject and object herself, and thus in a cunning way protects him by exclusion. She is herself the subject who loves and who says so, and she is herself the object who is 'transfigured' by her own desire" (Leighton 102). By adopting this attitude of compromise, Barrett Browning reconciles the roles of woman/poet/wife.

Coming back to Dickinson, Poems 246 and 249 reveal a feeling of security and safety because the woman is with her man, or would like to be, and Eberwein's interpretation, in *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitations*, reflects this. A close reading of Poem 246, however, shows that the woman is definitely taking on a lesser position, although it seems as if she does not realize it. She is "The smaller of the two!/Brain of His Brain—/Blood of His Blood—" Poem 631, however, sounds a definitely bitter note. When her friend is married, the speaker also decides to do the same. The difference between them, though, was that the speaker is "overtaken in the Dark." This expression suggests the speaker was caught unawares, and possibly against her will, and the experience is not a pleasant one as is evident from her descriptions of her surroundings as cold and bleak.

Poem 732 is perhaps one of the most poignant expressions of the conflicts between the existence of a woman, a wife, and a poet. The woman is described as having to submit to the man's "Requirement," and abandon her own existence to serve his. She must drop "The Playthings of Her Life" to undertake "the honorable Work/Of Woman, and of Wife —." The plaything may be interpreted as the "pen" with which the girl had been exercising her literary talents. With marriage, she must surrender her art, in order to fit into her role as "woman" and "wife." Barrett Browning faced no such dilemma in her "Sonnets." For her, it was more a conflict of her various ailments – her age, her illness – which made her hesitate to accept Browning's hand.

Dickinson's poetry expresses more an assertion of the conflicts between the woman/poet/wife unlike Barrett Browning, and for independence. Her poems adopt more of a feminist voice than Barrett Browning ever does in her "Sonnets." According to Betsy Erkkila, "Dickinson's life and work represented a swerve away from rather than a continuation of the female literary life represented by Barrett Browning. ... If Dickinson was 'enchanted' by Barrett Browning's 'Tomes of solid Witchcraft,' her life and writing suggest that once the initial enchantment wore off, she moved against and away from her literary precursor" (77). Although there is a regret in Dickinson's poetry sometimes of how the woman's role as wife confines her within a boundary, marked by the man's desires and "Requirement," her poetry asserts an authority that Barrett Browning's "Sonnets" did not, primarily, perhaps because Barrett Browning had been able to come to terms with her position as woman/wife as she had already made a place for herself in the man's world as a poet before she ever met Robert Browning. The question of asserting her position, therefore, never arose.

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