

## Joanne Feit Diehl: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

In a most attenuated, urbane vision, Dickinson crosses the threshold between life and death, yet she retains the power of speech to assert an audacious authority over all experience. The poem is "Because I could not stop for Death," which I read through Freud's "The Theme of the Three Caskets," a text that, in its antithetical argument clarifies Dickinson's relationship to desire and to the awareness of her own death. In his essay, Freud suggests that the male character in Shakespeare's tragedies, when faced with a choice that would fulfill his desire, elects silence, and that his choice signifies the conversion of his own inevitable death, over which he has no control, into an active choosing on his part. Thus, a man may strive to convert the necessity of dying into a willed gesture; in Freud's words, he is therefore able to "make friends with the necessity of dying." Freud draws upon Bassanio's choice in *The Merchant of Venice* of the casket containing lead, the apparently least valuable and dullest of the three caskets before him, which wins him the supremely articulate Portia. Here Freud makes the connection between the caskets or boxes and women as representatives of enclosure or womblike space. He reminds us that the silent Cordelia is King Lear's choice among his daughters and that as the silent woman, Cordelia is both origin and end: mother/mate/fate. Freud cites the end of Lear.

Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms. Cordeila is Death. Reverse the situation and it becomes intelligible and familiar to us---the Death-goddess bearing away the dead hero from the place of battle, like the Valkyr in German mythology. Eternal wisdom, in the garb of the primitive myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying.

Freud concludes, "But it is in vain that the old man yearns after the love of woman as once he had it from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent goddess of Death, will take him into her arms."

Silent too, is that accommodating gentleman who stops for the woman in Dickinson's poem. Here the speaker is carried by death, and the poem attempts the kind of consolation Freud understands as a requirement for the male imagination before it can accept its fate. Although the speaker wishes to discover a means of converting inevitability into active choice, the poem's strategy is complex, going beyond a simple shift in sexual identification. What marks the break between Freud's Shakespearean women and Dickinson's persona is that Dickinson's woman refuses to be silent; she speaks throughout the experience. If there is no conversation between death and the woman, we nevertheless hear a voice that leads us through the journey to death and beyond, and that voice is the lyric "I" of the supposed victim who becomes the poem's controlling consciousness. The initial refusal of the woman to stop for death is identical to the male character's resistance manifested at the approach of death. Dickinson not only has him "stop" to pick her up, but also, as Harold Bloom has noted, she stops him. Death stops at her bidding, winning for the poet the privilege to lie against time. Death, though he may be kind, is no conversationalist, and what she knows, she learns

through her own observation and surmise. The third party to this aide, "the chaperone, immortality," Bloom identifies with Dickinson's poems, thus leading to the triumph of art over death. And though this triumph is assuredly true for us who have her poems, I would suggest a different identity than the one Bloom assigns the chaperone, for if the poems offer a way of ensuring immortality (the texts themselves placed in a drawer, a box reminiscent of a casket?), this version of immortality does not ease the shock the self undergoes at the poem's close. The speaker is stunned not because she has achieved immortality, but because the acute awareness of the passage of time is just what has not fallen away. Immortality, with its promised freedom from the anxieties of chronos, is endlessly deferred at the poem's close.

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity--

The feeling of being "shorter than the Day" is not equivalent to that of atemporality. The speaker knows it has been centuries; time is measurable, but that first day, despite the cover, the protection, the civility, could not be made easier. Nothing protects her from the realization of her own death, nor is she freed by it.

Immortality provides no consolation, only prolonged consciousness of the end. It therefore functions as a blocking agent rather than the casket of art and more likely represents the presence of the absent Mother who vigilantly and for all time restrains the daughter from fulfilling her desire for the Father, from making friends with death. Although she is carried in a carriage (a sort of moving casket), the speaker nonetheless keeps her voice and maintains her awareness. Although death stops for her, her journey itself becomes an endless quest for Eternity. That one cannot triumph over time or over death may be this poem's most sorrowful wisdom. What remains within the speaker's control despite this defeat is the power of speech, a consciousness even death cannot efface. The triumph for art may be not that it will last beyond the poet, but that it continues to witness her refusal to make friends with death. Thus, Dickinson metaphorically murders death in order to control him; rather than make him her friend, she envisions him as the composite power that would seduce, wed, and silence her. Poem after poem strives to release death's hold by imagining his death as her freedom.

The lead casket will not be dumb, nor will Dickinson accept her appointed role as death mother through silence or concealment. Dickinson's revisionist rejection evolves out of the imperative to speak against the silent Father and the Mother who restrains her from fulfilling her desire. Thus, the "I" is doubly dependent. Yearning for the unattainable Father, she discovers him within her psyche; his strength turns against the self, making her victim of what she most desires. Thus, Dickinson must encounter and continually reenact the struggle with the exclusionary male who prefers to withhold rather than confer. Refused the assurance of becoming the Christa of American poetry or the new Christ as Whitman might triumphantly proclaim himself, Dickinson does not inherit Emerson's powers unchallenged. She first must resolve through aggression her need for supremacy in imaginatively murderous acts that recur because murder of the tradition is a most illusory triumph. Hers is a poetics as aggressive as any male oedipal struggle, yet complicated by an intensified vulnerability, a

consciousness of perpetual exile, the awareness of the impossibility of winning adequate patriarchal recognition. With her characteristic astuteness, Dickinson once remarked, "When the subject is finished, words are handed away." But her words, though they may have slowed in her final years, were never discarded because her subject achieves no resolution. Conflict over death becomes, indeed, a form of poetic life. Unable to write without the "Father," yet forced to vanquish him in order to survive, Dickinson, with subtlety, wit, and death-defying irony, practices her murderous poetics. Sharp as surgeon's steel, this very praxis redeems the dependence her poems counter and magnificently, if sacrificially, destroy.

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