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THE WHITE WITCH: EMILY DICKINSON AND COLONIAL AMERICAN WITCHCRAFT

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THE WHITE WITCH: EMILY DICKINSON
AND COLONIAL AMERICAN WITCHCRAFT

(TITLE)

BY

AMY M. SPARKS

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1990
YEAR

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ABSTRACT

Critics have offered numerous metaphors to assist them in structuring their discussions of Emily Dickinson's poetry. For example, Sandra M. Gilbert uses the metaphor of a nun to explicate several of Dickinson's poems. Gilbert sees Dickinson as having sought a spiritual community in much the way a nun enters a covenant, and Dickinson's poems are viewed as a nun's offerings of praise.

There is one metaphor, however, that has yet to be fully developed, and that is the metaphor of the witch. Dickinson thought of herself as a rebel. In viewing her work from our present perspective, we can look back and see that her rebellion can be linked with the religious rebellion of women who became identified as witches. Several poems deal with issues central to the witchcraft scare of seventeenth-century Puritan New England, and reading these poems in light of the witch metaphor is the basis of my thesis.

There are three interpretive implications we can derive from Dickinson's poems that point to a connection with witchcraft. First is her initiation into the society of witches. This can be seen most clearly in "I think I was enchanted" (#593) when Dickinson tells us how the work, referred to as "Tomes of solid Witchcraft," of "that

Foreign Lady," a kinswoman of spirit, enticed Dickinson to the creation of poetry just as many New England witches had been enticed to the practices of witchcraft.

The second area of Dickinson's connection to witchcraft concerns her religious rebellion. Dickinson chose not to simply accept the tenets of the nineteenth-century American Protestant church. Dickinson believed in God, as did seventeenth-century witches; what unites Dickinson with these witches is that their way of approaching God lay outside of socially sanctioned channels. This refusal to adhere to her family and community's religious standards and her close scrutiny of religious "truths" is reflected in two of her poems, "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) and "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (#324) where she redefines traditional aspects of Christianity.

Finally, Emily Dickinson uses the powers traditionally attributed to witches to transform her words into acts of will. She uses language to cast spells and recreate life. Two four-line poems, "Witchcraft was hung, in History" (#1583) and "Witchcraft has not a Pedigree" (#1708), are her "charms" in which the business of witchcraft is connected to the life-giving essence in all of us. In a longer poem, "A Word made Flesh is Seldom" (#1651), Dickinson connects the act of saying with the act of existing, how words make our spirit and our being. Language is power, and it belongs to those who take it up and use it. Witches use this power just as Emily Dickinson does.

For my thesis, I plan to use the Thomas H. Johnson editions of The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1951) and The Letters of Emily Dickinson (1958). I will choose a select number of poems to show how the metaphor of the witch offers us a richer way of reading and understanding the work of Emily Dickinson. For critical support, I shall explore the work of several important feminist critics. Among them are Adrienne Rich's ground-breaking article on Dickinson, "Vesuvius at Home" (1976), Jane Donahue Eberwein's "Emily Dickinson and the Calvinist Tradition," and the chapter, "A Woman--White: Emily Dickinson," in Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic.

Ancestress: the burning witch,
her mouth covered by leather
to strangle words

a word after a word
after a word is power.

"Spelling" Margaret Atwood
1981

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents Page number

Abstract.. i

Epigram... iv

Acknowledgements................................ v

Table of Contents............................... vi

I: Introduction................................. 1

II: Initiation into the Witchcraft Tradition.... 6

III: Dickinson's Religious Rebellion............ 19

IV: The Power of Language....................... 31

V: Conclusion................................... 44

Works Cited..................................... 47

I

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was a woman who scorned society, who hid in her home, and according to her neighbors, crept out only at night. She knew all the secrets of the domestic life, but never married, keeping her father's house as if it had been a husband's home. Raised in a traditionally religious home, she never formally accepted the tenets of that religion, and in later years never went to church. In the nineteenth century, she was considered merely an exceptional and amusing family eccentric. Had she lived in the seventeenth century though, Dickinson might have been cried down as a witch.

Obviously, Dickinson did not view herself as a witch, but the metaphor as applied to her poetry can offer us a new way to explore her work. The witch metaphor began to be associated with Dickinson in an influential essay first published in 1932 by Allen Tate: "Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch" is Tate's concluding statement (298). Though Tate offered this metaphor as a way to see how Dickinson's poetry fit into the Puritan-influenced world of nineteenth-century Massachusetts, the implications of the witch metaphor have never been fully developed.

It is Dickinson's use of language that is her strongest link to witchcraft. We can see her as a kind of "witch," not the old hag dressed foot to head in black, but as a woman who has tapped into the elemental power of language, a woman who wears white in order to print herself on life's pages and who deals in the "magic" of words.

Carol F. Karlsen in her book, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, gives us a detailed examination of witchcraft in colonial New England. She examines common characteristics of the women who were accused of and executed for witchcraft. Karlsen notes that not only "random lapses from social norms" would provoke the community into accusations of witchcraft, but also that there were "two types of dangerous trespass: challenges to the supremacy of God and challenges to prescribed gender arrangements" (119). Though Dickinson was clearly not practicing maleficium, the act of causing "harm to others by supernatural means" (Karlsen 6), she does fit some of the characteristics of the New England witch.

Dickinson thought of herself as a rebel. In viewing her work from our present perspective, we can see her rebellion linked with the religious rebellion of those women who were identified as witches. As Adrienne Rich writes in her article, "Vesuvius at

Home": "Active willing and creation in women are forms of aggression, and aggression is both 'the power to kill' and punishable by death" (65). The crime of witchcraft, "punishable by death," was a crime because witches were a threat to society. They had the power to harm and to heal, powers traditionally associated only with God.

Witches were in active rebellion against God. They worked on earth with God's enemy, Satan; their chief goal was to entice souls away from God and to the devil. Dickinson's rebellion led to ". . .the magnitude of the poetic self-creation Emily Dickinson achieved through working in a genre that has been traditionally the most Satanically assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women: lyric poetry" (Gilbert and Gubar 582). Dickinson expressed her rebellion through poetry. Here she could safely voice her anger and frustration at the rigidly controlled social and religious structure in which she lived.

There are three interpretive implications we can derive from Dickinson's poems that point to her connection with witchcraft. First is her initiation into the society of witches. This can be seen most clearly in "I think I was enchanted" (#593) where Dickinson reveals how the work of "that Foreign Lady," an older female poet, enticed her to her own creative endeavors. In this poem, Dickinson refers to the books of poetry that captivated her when she read them as "Tomes of solid Witchcraft." An older woman enticing a young girl to practice witchcraft was common among the Puritan witches, and Dickinson follows a similar path when she is enticed into "practicing" poetry.

The second connection that the witch metaphor offers concerns Dickinson's religious rebellion. Some of the witches of colonial New England were individuals who refused to attend church or who argued against accepted Puritan doctrine. These men and women fought their community for the right to express their personal religious feelings or their lack of them. Dickinson also fought, but she struggled against a God who she felt was unfair and a community that held to rigidly-defined social and religious roles. A poem like "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) reveals Dickinson's refusal to adhere to her family's and community's religious standards, and it reflects her close scrutiny of religious "truths."

Dickinson can be associated with witchcraft through the use of language as well. Traditionally, witches have been accused of using words for evil purposes, casting spells to harm an enemy or destroy property. Dickinson used language to recreate life. Two four-line poems, "Witchcraft was hung, in History"

(#1583) and "Witchcraft has not a Pedigree" (#1708) are her "charms" in which the business of witchcraft is connected to the life-giving essence in all of us. Language is power, and Dickinson used language to become powerful.

How Dickinson used the word "witchcraft" is best seen in the poems which use the word, but she also uses "witchcraft" in her letters. For instance, in a letter written to Otis P. Lord sometime during the year 1878, Dickinson wrote, "It may surprise you I speak of God--I know him but a little, but Cupid taught Jehovah to many an untutored Mind--Witchcraft is wiser than we--" (Letters II, 617). This is a very telling example of the way Dickinson defined "witchcraft." She starts by talking about God, saying that she knows him "but a little" and that love, "Cupid," is the one who educated "many an untutored Mind" about God. "Witchcraft is wiser than we" because "Witchcraft" is not, by definition, earthbound. It cannot be structured or made to conform to rules, yet witchcraft, for Dickinson, contains wisdom and teaches us about love and God, the bases for religion. Dickinson's education in love and God is rooted in "witchcraft." We shall see in the next section how Dickinson was initiated into the "wisdom of witchcraft."

II

INITIATION INTO THE WITCHCRAFT TRADITION

There are parallels in the way individuals in seventeenth-century New England were called to witchcraft and the way Emily Dickinson was called two centuries later to her craft, poetry. Dickinson was called to her craft by an older poet, a kinswoman of spirit, just as many of New England witches had been enticed to witchcraft, by an older practitioner. Dickinson reveals the nature of this experience in "I think I was enchanted" (#593):

> I think I was enchanted
> When first a sombre Girl--
> I read that Foreign Lady--
> The Dark--felt beautiful--
>
> And whether it was noon at night--
> Or only Heaven--at Noon--
> For very Lunacy of Light
> I had not power to tell--
>
> The Bees--became as Butterflies--
> The Butterflies--as Swans--
> Approached--and spurned the narrow Grass--
> And just the Meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer--
I took for Giants--practising
Titanic Opera--

The Days--to Mighty Metres stept--
The Homeliest--adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed--

I could not have defined the change--
Conversion of the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul--
Is witnessed--not explained--

'Twas a Divine Insanity--
The Danger to be Sane
Should I again experience--
'Tis Antidote to turn--

To Tomes of solid Witchcraft--
Magicians be asleep--
But Magic--hath an Element
Like Deity--to keep--

(#593)

In the first four lines of this poem, we are

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introduced to some of the key elements of Emily Dickinson's "witchcraft." First, the poetry of "that Foreign Lady," often thought by critics to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning[1], enticed Dickinson to her life's work of poetry. It is this enticement that is crucial, for as Carol F. Karlsen reveals in her book, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: "Witches were most dangerous as seducers of other females, and they were especially given to working on the young" (135). For the Puritans in seventeenth-century New England, witches were dangerous precisely because they enticed other young women to join them in their rebellion. For example, the five-year old Dorcas Good confessed to authorities that she had practiced witchcraft and that "it was her mother who had given her a familiar," her mother then who had been her daughter's introduction to witchcraft (Hansen 84).

For Dickinson, as "a Sombre Girl," to have read the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and been fascinated with both the woman and the work meant an introduction to "the Dark." This then was her introduction to the darkness of poetic witchcraft, and Browning was her experienced guide, almost a female Virgil, to lead Dickinson through "the Dark."

This darkness had a power to completely change the physical world or at least change the way Dickinson saw the world:

> The Bees--became as Butterflies--
> The Butterflies--as Swans--

Approached--and spurned the narrow Grass--
And just the Meanest Tunes

That Nature mumured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer--
I took for Giants--practising
Titanic Opera--

(#593)

The natural things of the world became other than themselves. They were changed in Dickinson's eyes after she experienced Browning's poetry. Bees looked like butterflies, and butterflies looked like swans. The sounds of nature 'murmuring to herself' became the sound of giants singing a larger-than-life opera. Her senses were completely overwhelmed as a result of reading Browning's poetry, and everything Dickinson saw or heard changed from what it had been before. This kind of enchantment sounds like what happens when a victim is "bewitched" through the black arts of witchcraft. Being bewitched means being so consumed that victims are unable for a time to function normally.

Dickinson describes in "I think I was enchanted" (#593) a "bewitchment," for the senses of sight and hearing are completely altered. It seems that just such a dramatic alteration in sensory perceptions induced by poetry was familiar to Dickinson. In a now familiar statement describing how she knows poetry, Dickinson is quoted by

Thomas Wentworth Higginson in his letter dated August 16, 1870:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way (*Letters* II, 473).

This kind of physical response to poetry can be paralleled to many of the physical responses to devil possession or bewitching as caused by a witch.

Both Karlsen and Chadwick Hansen offer a description of how young victims bewitched by practicing witches were afflicted by these tormentors. Hansen in his book, *Witchcraft at Salem*, describes how victims would endure "hideous convulsive fits . . . thought to be the result of witches and demons wrenching the bodies of their victims into torturous postures" (32). Furthermore, these victims experienced sensory deprivations such as being unable to swallow but a few drops of water for long periods of time or being temporarily blinded or made deaf (32). For Dickinson, of course, the "bewitching" she experienced upon reading Browning's poetry was no torture to induce Dickinson to sign her soul away, but it did accomplish one significant task. Dickinson's "bewitchment" led her to look toward poetry as inspiration and guide in her own life. Poetry became her life's aim.

The older poet-witch, Browning, brought about a "Conversion of the Mind" within her young reader. Not even Dickinson herself could explain how the conversion worked; it was to be "witnessed--not explained--" (#593). She describes her "Conversion" in terms of a Christian-like sacrament. It was a "Sanctifying in the Soul," something to recognize but impossible to explain logically. Again, this fits the pattern set by colonial New England witches. Their conversion to Satan was a reverse of what they had been before as members of God's chosen elect. It sanctified them to the unholy task of serving Satan. Clearly, Dickinson was not converted to serving the devil, but this "conversion" she experiences does change her whole existence. It gives her her life's task, writing poetry. In a way, Browning did convert Dickinson to a new kind of worship, the worship of poetic endeavor.

Dickinson recognized how this "bewitchment" was working on her psyche, for she called it "a Divine Insanity." However, once introduced to the "insanity" of poetry, the danger lay in what others called sanity. If, for any reason, she should "again experience--/The Danger to be Sane" Dickinson can cure herself by turning to "Tomes of solid Witchcraft" (#593). Dickinson experienced what she called witchcraft in her reading of Browning. Something that could induce such possession of the senses had to be non-human. It had to contain "an Element/Like

Deity" that would lift readers out of the world of the sane and the orderly and into an insane world where sensations are extraordinarily transformed.

"I think I was enchanted" (#593) is one poem that offers us a look at how Dickinson became interested in poetry and who influenced her in this interest. We also get a hint about how Dickinson wished her own poetry to reach readers. If we see what I refer to as Dickinson's "bewitchment" as her way of expressing the experience of her introduction and conversion to the practice of poetry, which she refers to as "Witchcraft" (#593), then we can view Dickinson's own work as a reflection of this conversion.

Dickinson's poetry is "witchcraft" in the tradition of the witches like Browning who inspired her. All of the poems Emily Dickinson wrote are the result of her "witchcraft;" they are her "witchcraft." "Dickinson seems to have based her working esthetics primarily on her own experiences as a reader, apparently seeking in her own writing to do for others as others had done for her" (Stonum 32).

As a poet-witch, it is her duty to reach others and invite them to this life of poetry or at any rate to the life that had been inspired by the work of poets and their poems. Her work was inspired by a poetic "witch," and her work acts as an inspiration to other "witches" who came after her. Adrienne Rich laments the fact, in her 1976 article, that Dickinson is not being "repossessed, as a source and a foremother" more than she has been (59). I do not believe Rich's use of the word "possessed" is merely coincidental. Dickinson's work was the result of a kind of "possession," a "bewitchment," that intense sensory response she had to poetry, Browning's as well as that of other poets. Readers who are inspired by Dickinson's poems in this same manner become, in turn, "bewitched" by her poetry. The power her poetry has to "bewitch" is comparable to the force of witchcraft's possession.

In a late poem, "Somewhere upon the general Earth" (#1231), Dickinson gives us another look at her poetic conversion. The first four lines of the poem again tell us of a sacramental experience:

> Somewhere upon the general Earth
> Itself exist Today--
> The Magic passive but extant
> That consecrated me--
>
> (#1231)

Although she does not refer specifically to witchcraft in the poem, her references are couched in language far from the language of traditional Christian sacramental rites. It was on the Earth she was consecrated by "The Magic passive but extant." A living magic consecrated her, not the living God as we might expect from a woman in revivalist Amherst in the nineteenth century. Her language indicates a source of inspiration outside of the church and its traditions. For instance, this inspiration came from "the general Earth," excluding Heaven, and therefore divine influence. It was "Magic" that consecrated her, not the church, and using a term like "Magic" suggests a non-Christian, even supernatural force. Again, we become aware that Dickinson had been inspired by a force outside the church.

This "Magic" was "passive" but exists still today. Its passivity indicates that it waits to be taken up again, that it is not an active force in the world but that it exists to be acted upon. This magical consecration in "Somewhere upon the general Earth" (#1231) can be associated with another Dickinson baptism offered in an earlier poem, "I'm ceded--I've stopped being Theirs" (#508). In this poem, Dickinson tells us that she experienced two different baptisms:

I'm ceded--I've stopped being Theirs--
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading--too--

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace--

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Unto supremest name--
Called to my Full--The Crescent dropped--
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank--too small the first--
Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--
A half unconscious Queen--
But this time--Adequate--Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown--
(#508)

The first baptism occurred when she was just an infant; she was "Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--/ A half unconscious Queen--" (#508). This was her familial, Christian baptism. She associates this baptism with the things of her childhood, "my Dolls,/My childhood, and the string of spools,/I've finished threading--too--" (#508). Her childhood baptism was, she seems to tell us here, an important part of her existence. Just as dolls teach children about nuturing and caring, her childhood name and membership in the church taught Dickinson much, but the time came when she "put away childish things" (King James Version 1 Corinthians 13:11). She was baptised as a child when she had no choice in the matter; she was "unconscious." As an adult, she chose her own name and her place in the world consciously, "Adequate--

Erect,/With Will to choose, or to reject" (#508). This second baptism meant a willful, personal acceptance of her self as having the conscious means to choose her future. Once Dickinson recognized her ability to choose and annointed herself to the task, she was prepared to take up her "Crown," a crown representing her poetic calling.

If we look at this poem in light of "I think I was enchanted" (#593), it is possible to see that Dickinson's second baptism might very well mean her acceptance of a private covenant, certainly one outside the church, comparable in its lack of traditional orthodoxy to the covenants witches made with Satan. When she "Stopped being Theirs" and became hers alone, we can imagine her embracing her poetry, with the complete acceptance it would have taken to devote a lifetime to it.

Dickinson's initiation experiences as seen in "I think I was enchanted" (#593), "Somewhere upon this general Earth" (#1231), and "I'm ceded--I've stopped being Theirs" (#508) all share the remarkable idea of undergoing some magical, non-Christian transcendence which led to her life's work, poetry. "Her spiritual transcendence thus results in social isolation; she undergoes her initiation alone and remains alone at its conclusion, selecting silence and solitude rather than a compromise of her integrity" (Singley 76). Emily Dickinson's "witchcraft" demanded a solitary life in which it could unfold itself, as it did in the more than 1700 poems whe have from her. Her initiation into the art of "witchcraft" brought her to poetry, and she spent her life exploring the power it gave her.

NOTE FOR CHAPTER II

[1] For an example, see Sandra M. Gilbert in "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood." In this article, Gilbert claims that "I think I was enchanted" (#593) explores a transformation of the "ordinary into the extraordinary [that] is a bewitching female art she actually learned from Elizabeth Barrett Browning" (35).

III

DICKINSON'S RELIGIOUS REBELLION

A second important metaphorical connection linking Emily Dickinson to witchcraft occurs in her ambivalence toward the established church of her community, a church directly influenced by seventeenth-century Puritanism. "Witchcraft was rebellion against God, and among grounds for examining a witch were signs that she had transferred her alliance from God to Satan" (Karlsen 120). Certainly, Dickinson never allied herself with Satan, but her relationship to God was highly individual and different from the tradition of an individual's relationship with God as mediated by the church.

Her behavior as it concerned the church has long been part of the Dickinson legend. As a young woman at Mount Holyoke Seminary for Women, Dickinson failed to stand up a be counted as one of the saved (Bishop 49), and she "stopped going to church regularly by the time she was thirty" (Sewall 238). Her rejection of traditional ways of worship does not necessarily mean that Dickinson was not religious, but she did establish a different religious practice--a point crucial to any witchcraft analogy.

At the present time, many people do not attend a church regularly, and many fail to profess any kind of public faith. To the modern observer, this kind of behavior does not impress us as particularly good or bad. In the nineteenth century, Dickinson's refusal to join in public worship was decidedly irregular, but behavior of this kind in the seventeenth century would have brought public censure upon her. "Anything from sabbath-breaking to overt repudiation of ministerial authority to blasphemy could be interpreted as signifying a covenant with the Devil" (Karlsen 120). Dickinson refused to swallow whole the tenets of the mid-nineteenth-century Trinitarian Congregationalism as practiced in the Connecticut River Valley. She did believe in God just as seventeenth-century witches did. After all, no one can rebel against God, practice supernatural acts, and serve Satan without some acceptance of Christian beliefs. The issue which unites Dickinson with these witches is that their way of approaching religion lay outside socially-sanctioned channels. Taking an individual approach to religion, one outside of the community's standard, was a sign of rebellion, and as Cotton Mather reminds us with this biblical injunction: "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft" (Wonders 195).

Dickinson's refusal to join her friends and family in communal worship was an act of rebellion. "In her religion, she chose to sacrifice church community to her lifelong personal encounter with God" (Eberwein 6). But questing after a "personal encounter" with the Almight was suspicious; it could brand an individual as proud and rebellious--prime characteristics of a witch. Regular church attendance was extremely important in the seventeenth century because at that time witchcraft was seen "as literal devil worship, and therefore as a rival to Christianity" (Hansen 62). Obviously, Dickinson's refusal to attend church was not taken by her nineteenth-century neighbors as a sign that she was a witch, but it was unusual behavior for a woman of her time and social position.

Dickinson herself recognized that her actions were out of the ordinary. In a letter of 1850, a year of strong religious revival in Amherst, she writes, " Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered Though her "rebellion" kept her from sharing much of her family and friends' religious interests, it did allow her the perspective to look critically at what was religion for the nineteenth century. Dickinson's rebellion also gave her room to create poetry. Because she looked at life through unorthodox eyes, Dickinson could create her unique and unorthodox poems that would fill the place left empty by traditional Christianity. "She would triumph by the word--her own Word" (Sewall 238).

One of her poems reveals her religious rebellion by criticizing crucial aspects of the Christian faith. "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) also reflects some of Dickinson's own beliefs concerning religion. In this poem, she redefines rigidly accepted aspects of Christianity.

She begins with "The Bible is an antique Volume--/Written by faded Men/At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--" (#1545). From the perspective of her rebellion, she points out the weakness at the center of Christianity. The Bible is an old book, well-respected but "antique," that was written by "faded Men." These "faded Men" bring to mind pictures of reproving Old Testament prophets or fervent zealots of the New Testament; none of whom seem to offer much comfort to the seventeenth or nineteenth-century truth-seeker. Traditional religion has relied upon these "faded Men" to lay down the law and has expected the vibrant individuals of the day to live that law. The witches of the seventeenth century refused to live the law; some in fact turned to the enemy, Satan, as a way to escape the pressures of such a strict way of life. Dickinson turned inward, allowing herself to be instructed by poet-witches in the art of poetry just as the "faded Men" were instructed by "Holy Spectres" and witches by unholy ones.

Dickinson's instruction in rebellion and witchcraft came not only from, as we have seen, poet-witches like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but from within herself as well. She nurtured herself in her rebellion and followed her instincts. In a letter, dated May 7 and 17, 1850, to Abiah Root, Dickinson reveals she is "one of the lingering _bad_ ones," one of the few who had refused to answer the revivalists' call to salvation (_Letters_ I, 98). In a longer passage from the same letter, she offers us a view of her sometimes troubling rebellion:

> I have come from "to and fro, and walking up, and down"--the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he'd been, but not to illustrate further I tell you I have been dreaming, dreaming a golden dream, with eyes all the while wide open . . .
>
> (Letters I, 99).

The reference to Satan is interesting in that it offers us a true look at just how personally Dickinson took her out-of-the ordinary behavior; she is one of the "bad ones." She associates herself and her state of mind with the place where Satan came from, probably when he contemplated his act of rebellion against God. Though Satan seems an unlikely companion for Dickinson, her inclination toward rebellion leads her to him.

Besides her rebellion, this passage also reflects Dickinson's growing absorption in what she calls here "a golden dream." Naturally, we can speculate that this dream concerns her poetic endeavor. The letter was written in May 1850, and Thomas H. Johnson puts the date of her first poem in The Complete Poems as Valentine week 1850. The second is dated 1851, and thereafter there are 1773 more poems. If Dickinson had envisioned a poetic heritage of almost 1800 poems, her dream must have indeed seemed golden, but it is important to remember that she associates that dream with the place where Satan hails from. She does not seat her poetry in the presence of God or Christianity but in rebellion. Her poetry was the result of her rebellion, and if rebellion was the sin of witchcraft, then Dickinson's poetry becomes evidence of her witchcraft. She used words as the weapon and tool of her rebellion, words "which she associated, half-mockingly, with satanic wrong-thoughts" (Pollak 36).

In "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) Dickinson redefines specific parts of religion. Her "witchcraft" turns them upside down and gives us a much different, almost cynical, look. This is appropriate because the very essence of witchcraft practice is the complete reversal of all things Christian. Saying the Lord's Prayer backwards and worshiping in a "black mass" were often thought to be standard practices of witches (Hansen 78). An example of this reversal can be seen when Dickinson renames Eden. It becomes "the ancient Homestead--" and "Satan--the Brigadier--." She continues:

> Judas--the Great Defaulter--
> David--the Troubadour--
> Sin--a distinguished Precipice
> Others must resist--
>
> (#1545).

The people and places intrinsic to Christianity are changed, given new epithets which reveal how people often think about them. Judas is no longer the man who betrayed Christ but becomes "the Great Defaulter." This epithet makes him seem like some one who skipped out on a loan payment, and David, who is almost a mythic figure in Christian lore, becomes "the Troubadour," known here for his poetry in praise of God. Emily Dickinson ends her definitions with sin--the one thing that is an integral part of Christian religion. Sin becomes a chasm, that, the speaker tells us, "others must resist." Here, Dickinson takes full aim at the hypocrisy she must have seen in the religion and the religious around her. Only the truly pious Christians will admit their sins; those who play at piety like to point out the sins of others.

in "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545), Dickinson recognizes the hypocrisy of the organized church. Later in the poem she reveals her own natural piety when she further extends her look at Christianity. She tells us:

> Boys that "believe" are very lonesome--
> Other Boys are "lost"--
> Had but the Tale a warbling Teller--
> All the Boys would come--
> Orpheus' Sermon captivated--
> It did not condemn--
>
> (#1545).

These last six lines sum up Dickinson's religious criticism, yet they also hint toward her personal view of what religion could be. Those people who accepted the nineteenth-century Protestant revivalist religion and its beliefs were "lonesome," she tells us, "lonesome" in their salvation. Possibly, they are lonely not only from purely lofty reasons but from the self-imposed isolation many of the fervently religious undertake. Often, those who believe so strongly will associate only with the small number of people who share their beliefs, Christianity being no exception, and those outside this small circle of believers are "lost" both to those who believe and to the belief itself. Dickinson also seems to be angry at a God who chooses to accept only a small number.

The last four lines offer us Dickinson's naturalistic view of religion. She alludes to Orpheus whose music in pre-Christian mythology charmed all the shades in Hades itself to make his escape from the underworld, and if the "Tale" of Christianity had such a "warbling Teller" as Orpheus, then "all the Boys would come" to believe and worship. The "sermon" that Orpheus preached, his enchanting music, brought people to him naturally and excluded no one. It did not condemn followers or induce guilt as Dickinson implies Christianity and its ministers do.

Because Dickinson rebelled against traditional religion, she was able to see religion from a much broader perspective and incorporate pre-Christian mythology into her understanding. She pointed out the weaknesses of

Christianity and imagined the possibility of a more compassionate religion. In "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) she relies on a more natural, less structured set of beliefs. Her religion, obviously at odds with the well-regulated Christianity of the nineteenth century, is based on a freer, less judmental system of faith, one that is the result of captivation through art, especially music. Orpheus' music enticed followers as did the poetry of David's psalms. This kind of restructuring of what Christianity is and could be is the kind of behavior that condemned individuals for witchcraft in colonial New England. Of course, no one was crying out "witches" in Amherst, Massachusetts in the 1800's, but Dickinson's behavior was surprisingly witch-like.

There is another poem of Dickinson's that expresses her rebellion against the established church. In "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (#324) she again revises traditional aspects of Christianity by linking them to nature and achieving an almost-Romantic vision of what going to church could mean:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church--
> I keep it, staying at Home--
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister--
> And an Orchard, for a Dome--
>
> Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice--

I just wear my Wings--
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little sexton--sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman--
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last--
I'm going, all along

(#324).

Dickinson insists on religion her way. She renames elements of religious practice to give them a place in her mythology. An orchard becomes her church, and a bird sings for the choir. God still preaches, but here the Almighty has become "a noted Clergyman." She ends by saying that her worship takes her to Heaven daily; she goes "all along." In her religion, worship does not bring her to Heaven at the end of her life; rather, worship is Heaven. It is a daily act of achieving the paradise lost to us through Christianity's original sin. "Emily Dickinson's spirituality is also marked by negation of the existing religious dogmas and a decision based on Self-Reliance to remake God and to create her own Heaven" (Bishop 50). In "The Bible is an antique Volume" (#1545) we saw Dickinson criticize and leave behind the established church of her time, and here in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (#324) we see how she creates Heaven in daily natural worship.

Dickinson's insistence in this poem on individual worship seems to be a mark of the nineteenth century's emphasis on the rugged individual, but it is important to remember that she links her way to worship with nature. Though in many respects this poem reflects Dickinson at her coy best as she talks about birds and God and having wings, it is more important to consider how nature existed in pre-Christian mythology. Nature and its elements were often associated with the female goddesses who held knowledge, and therefore power, of the Earth's secrets. The Earth itself was a female deity long before men dominated worship practices. Witches were feared because they could tap into this knowledge and use it to both heal and hurt. They were called witches because to Christian believers that kind of knowledge represented a pre-Christian, therefore "pagan," existence, and they could only explain that existence by calling it devil worship. Consequently, it became something to be feared and to be gotten rid of. Dickinson's intimacy with nature and her rebellion against traditional Christianity connect her to traditional witchcraft.

In "To be alive--is Power--" (#677) Dickinson goes one step beyond rebellion and claims her will as equal to the will of God:

> To be alive--is Power--
> Existence--in itself--
> Without a further function--

Omnipotence--Enough--

To be alive--and Will!
'Tis able as a God--
The Maker--of Ourselves--be what--
Such being Finitude!

(#677).

In the first stanza Dickinson tells us that simply being alive "without a further function" is power, that it is "Omnipotence--Enough." Life is power, and even if we do not take advantage of the power itself, we are still creatures of immense capabilities. The second stanza claims that if we function past mere existence, to "will" ourselves in action, we become as "able as a God." God is alive and acts on the will that is inherent to all. Though we consider ourselves limited to our mortality, she insists here that our "finitude" exists in the mind only. Our life is enough to make us gods. It was this kind of pride and ambition that according to Christian belief had Lucifer cast out of Heaven and Adam and Eve cast out of the Garden of Eden. It was also this kind of behavior that got witches hung. "To be alive is power," but to act out our will makes us God-like.

Power is an important issue with Dickinson. We have seen how she rebelled against Christianity and God and practiced her own unorthodox method of religion. Next, I shall demonstrate how Dickinson chose to use her power, the power of language.

IV

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The third way the witch metaphor helps us to explore Emily Dickinson's poetry lies in her use of language. As poet, Dickinson tapped into the elemental power of language, and like the witches of seventeenth-century New England, she uses words to cast spells, to charm her future audience. It is in her words, her poetry, where we see the most striking evidence of her "witchcraft." For instance, "Witchcraft was hung, in History" (#1583) and "Witchcraft has not a Pedigree" (#1708) are each four lines long and look like a charm that a witch might utter. Their focus is Emily Dickinson's own definition of what witchcraft is and how it works:

> Witchcraft was hung, in History,
> But History and I
> Find all the Witchcraft that we need
> Around us, every Day--
>
> (#1583).

This short poem tells us much about how its author defined "Witchcraft." First, she gives witchcraft a place "in History." Witches were hung as we know from our history books, and with those witches, "Witchcraft was hung," too. Those who hung individuals for being witches thought that witchcraft could be killed off; its power defused so that it would no longer be a threat. And it seems witchcraft "died." After 1700, no other person died for practicing witchcraft in New England (Karlsen 44). However, Dickinson shows us she remembers witchcraft. And not just she, but "History" remembers as well. "History and I" can "find" witchcraft--all that they "need." Witchcraft becomes a basic human need like oxygen and food; its presence is "Around us, every Day." In "Witchcraft was hung, in History" (#1583) then, we see one way Dickinson used the term, "witchcraft." For her, witchcraft is not the practice of 'black magic' but rather the practices of living. Witchcraft is a part, a natural part, of everyday experience.

A related idea can be seen in another of Emily Dickinson's "charms:"

> Witchcraft has not a Pedigree
> 'Tis early as our Breath
> And mourners meet it going out
> The moment of our death--
> (#1708).

Here she says that "Witchcraft" does not have a name or a label, a "Pedigree," but it is as natural to us as our breath. Most of us only recognize its presence when it is gone, for it leaves us at our death. Yet in this poem Dickinson tells us that witchcraft is taken in by us at birth just as our first breath of air is taken in. "Witchcraft" here is life or mortality since it leaves at death. It might be the mysteries of nature, for it gives us breath and energy; it sustains us, keeps us alive to the mystery of life, but it takes a poet-witch like Emily Dickinson to remind us that witchcraft is the very basis of our existence.

This poem also gives us the opportunity to look at just how closely women can be connected to the witchcraft of Dickinson's kind. Though men were accused and convicted of witchcraft just as women were, the majority of all witchcraft convictions were women. Specifically what connected women to witchcraft is our concern here.

Women of Dickinson's time were much closer to life and death than we are now. First of all, their mortality rates, and especially their infant mortality rates, were much higher than ours, and even higher in the seventeenth century. There was a slender thread connecting life and death. A witch is the object of fear because she weaves such threads, using her unnatural powers to both heal and harm. She is beyond mortal controls and male domination; she carries life but may also take life away. Witches in seventeenth-century New England were "thought to interfere with nature" obstructing reproductive processes (Karlsen 7). Anything from suspicious miscarriages to childbirth fatalities, even unexpected successes in delivering healthy babies, could be construed as evidence of witchcraft.

The thread lying between death and life was a place where witches walked, and it is their ability to walk this thin line that arouses fear from those who are unable to make the same walk. As for Dickinson, though she herself never bore children, she did carry life in her poetry. That was where her creation took place, and that is why she had no fear of facing death in her art; her "witchcraft" affirms life because she controls its creative powers.

Her poetry also is an act of defiance, and her defiance is expressed vividly in "I took my Power in my Hand:"

> I took my Power in my Hand--
> And went against the World--
> 'Twas not so much as David--had--
> But I--was twice as bold--
>
> I aimed my Pebble--but Myself
> Was all the one that fell--
> Was it Goliah--was too large--
> Or was myself--too small?
>
> (#540)

In this poem, Dickinson uses another Biblical allusion, that of the story of David and Goliath, to strengthen our understanding of the story she tells here. Taking her "Power" in hand, she goes out to fight the world. Her power she tells us is less than that of young David's as he went out against the Philistine giant, "But I--was twice as bold--." Her boldness leads her to naught, for it is she who falls and not the giant World. The poem ends with her question: "Was it Goliah--was too large--/Or was myself--too small?" Of course, we can speculate as to the answer, but the heart of the poem lies in her question.

Can one woman, be she poet or witch or both, take on the world and win? It is a question that has plagued women for years, and though "I took my Power in my Hand" (#540) seems to offer us a no-win situation, it is also possible to see Dickinson's "defeat" as a victory. Adrienne Rich offers us a way to make this transformation in her article, "Vesuvius at Home:" "To recognize and acknowledge our own interior power has always been a path mined with risks for women; to acknowledge that power and commit oneself to it as Emily Dickinson did is an immense decision" (57). Dickinson's boldness drove her to challenge the world on its terms with the power she had within her, but her power was not enough to win against the male-dominated nineteenth-century world she was challenging. She retreated to her world--the world of home and hearth. It was here she could write poetry that was hers, not the world's.

This retreat has for years been treated as a defeat, but many recent critics have shown it for what it truly was--a strategic withdrawal to the one place she could take on the world and win. See for an example Suzanne Juhasz's Introduction to Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson.

"Feminist critics have repeatedly pointed to the conflict that a woman wanting to be a poet must necessarily experience between the social role of woman and the work of poet. We have relabelled the 'retreat' a strategy: a move into a space . . ." where she could explore and control her experiences (8). Her decision to remain "small" and at home can be clarified even more if we place it within the witch metaphor.

Because poetry for Dickinson meant being "possessed" in a way that effected the senses, through poetry she was able to leave behind the rational aspects of the mind and exist through a physical response to the words on the page. Within the witchcraft tradition as Karlsen describes it, possessed women, women who are physically in the throes of a Satanic force, could "assert the witch within." A woman possessed "could dismiss the kind man in the black robe who himself symbolized her longed-for independence and power and tell him what a rogue she thought he was. For the moment, she could be as powerful as he" (247).

In her home, in her room, in her poetry, Dickinson was as powerful as any nineteenth-century Goliath. Though she lost the battle with the world outside, she wins inside when she battles with the world and its influence in her work. The witches of the seventeenth century were called out to battle the giant "World," and they, too, lost because of their smallness. Who knows of the inner battles they must have fought?

Dickinson was bold and angry and used words as she wished to express that boldness and anger. New England Puritan witches were hung for their boldness, their anger, and very often their words. Evidence of one woman's witchcraft consisted of bestowing "very bad Language" on a young girl who was then taken with "strange fits" (Memorable Providences 100-103). The use of language then could be very dangerous for anyone and a woman especially, for as Karlsen explains, this "bad Language" came after the young girl accused the older woman of a household theft (33). The accusation was offered as an explanation of what prompted the language, but it was never offered as an excuse. The woman's words were offered as proof she was a witch. Only a bad woman (read witch) would use angry or bad words.

Dickinson's connection to witchcraft was noted, though not fully explored, when Allen Tate concluded his essay on the poet with: "Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch" (298). When Karl Keller attempts to defuse the appropriateness of the witch metaphor as it applies to Dickinson by replying that Cotton Mather would have indicted her "for a harpy maybe, but not a witch," Keller fails to understand just what it meant to be a witch in Puritan New England (Keller 51). A harpy is a scolding, angry woman, and "Anger, no matter how mild, was viewed with suspicion when the person expressing it was a woman" (Karlsen 130). An angry woman was just one step away from being a witch; all she needed was an accuser. Though Tate hardly qualifies as an accuser, he was the first to suggest Dickinson's connection to witchcraft, and calling her a "witch" can be justified if we examine her use of words in light of how other witches used them.

Witches were greatly feared in Puritan New England because of the power they had and the damage they could cause. "A witch's grumbling words or thinly veiled threats following an argument were taken as evidence that she was either planning or actually initiating some harm" (Karlsen 7). A witch's curse could and did cause real, actual harm to Puritan colonists. An argument with a suspected witch might bring all kinds of trouble to the household: everything from cattle or crop damage to food spoilage to the illness or even death of a family member.

Chadwick Hansen offers us a particular instance of how a witch used words to predict the fate of her prosecuter. Convicted of witchcraft, Sarah Good at her execution, reportedly told the Reverend Nicholas Noyes, "'I am no more witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life God will give you blood to drink.' . . .tradition has it that twenty-five years later, when Nicholas Noyes lay dying, he choked upon the blood that poured copiously from his mouth" (Hansen 167). Obviously, when a witch spoke, things happened. Uttering a spell was truly a speech-act, for saying something meant something actually occurred in the world.

Although Dickinson was not a malefic witch and she did not ever cause harm to another person though the use of black magic, she did use words in much the same way a witch used them. Writing words for her was taking action. "Creating poetry or 'dealing' words for this woman appears to be synonymous with creating a world" (Miller 148). A witch makes something happen when she utters a spell, and Dickinson, too, makes something happen when she creates a poem; she uses poetry "as the agent of experience" (Juhasz 105). We can see an example of how this works in another of Dickinson's short poems:

> A word is dead
> When it is said,
> Some say.
>
> I say it just
> Begins to live
> That day
>
> (#1212)

Here, we can see her ascribing life to words. A word lives when it has been uttered, and it continues to live from that point on. From this, we can connect Dickinson's poems to the spells of a witch. When a witch says a spell and when Emily Dickinson writes a poem, they are both making an act--an act of defiance or vengeance or an act of joy or celebration. Most importantly though, these are acts of will on the part of these women. They are acts which assert themselves on behalf of the women who make them.

Another poem which illustrates Dickinson's use of the power of language is "A Man may make a Remark" (#952). Here again, we witness how the act of saying has power in itself, power to create as well as to destroy. This poem is a view of how Dickinson sees the power that the act of saying contains within it:

> A Man may make a Remark--
> In itself--a quiet thing
> That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark
> In dormant nature--lain--
>
> Let us deport--with skill--
> Let us discourse--with care--
> Powder exists in Charcoal--
> Before it exists in Fire
> (#952).

From the beginning of the poem, we see that the act of saying words is the act of creation; we "may make a Remark" (my emphasis). "Dickinson invokes the power of language, asserting that her word may vie with the Divine for authority over herself and her experience" (Diehl 157). Like her seventeenth-century counterparts, the "witch" of nineteenth-century Amherst took action by taking up words.

Even though her words may seem small like their creator, "a quiet thing," they have the potential to "furnish the Fuse unto a Spark." Dickinson uses the language of explosion here as metaphoric of what happens when we speak. A quiet remark can ignite even the most "dormant nature."

It is in this poem we can understand Dickinson's feeling for words. Richard Sewall tells us in his biography of Dickinson that "her feeling for words went far beyond the aesthetic response . . . . In her sense of their power to heal or kill," words could, and did, actually affect life (676). Words contain the ability to physically harm an individual, and an example of this is, of course, the witch's spell. Words could heal as well, and we have numerous examples of this in Dickinson's collected letters. Frequently after a death in a family, Dickinson would write to the bereaved offering comfort. "No one surpassed her in that delicate art" (Sewall 205). Emily Dickinson knew that there was an inherent power in words, and to use them wisely meant learning to play with fire and not letting the fire consume her.

In the second stanza, Dickinson warns us to be careful when using words. "Let us deport--with skill--/Let us discourse--with care--." Words demand respectful treatment she tells us because "Powder exists in Charcoal/Before it exists in Fire." Again, she carries the image of explosion and danger though to the end of the poem. Her warning here reminds us that words, though small in themselves, contain danger to harm. We often dismiss this danger by saying things like "words can't harm you," but words can indeed harm. They contain the power which used in the right context can explode upon us causing real harm. Dickinson knew that words contained this power, this danger. Her "witchcraft" allowed her not only to recognize the power of words, but also to bring them under her control, to use them and not allow them to use her. It is a dangerous place where this "witch" writes from, but it is the place where words live and an author becomes the creator. "It is the poet, of course, who brings about this mythical transformation of word into flesh. She knew that the achievement was rare. 'Sometimes,' she wrote Lyman, 'I write one'" (Sewall 677).

"A Word made Flesh is seldom" (#1651) is a poem that unites her particular brand of Christianity with her divine calling, poetry. Jesus was the "word made flesh," and as poet, Dickinson makes words come to life. "A Word that breathes distinctly/Has not the power to die" (#1651). That word is "Cohesive as the Spirit" (#1651). She unites Christian imagery with the imagery of her poetic "witchcraft." Jesus as Son of God had "not the power to die" but could, and did, die if He condescended to come to earth and be "Like this consent of Language." Jesus and language become as one. Both are immortal as spirit, but the maker (God and poet) gives them life by sending them forth to accomplish what they must.

Dickinson becomes a creator when she writes poems; she makes poetic spells and becomes a "witch" who has tapped into the natural elements. She gives life to words, and words become flesh. Her "witchcraft" does contain elements that harm just as it contains the power to heal and comfort, yet through it all, Dickinson strives to affirm life, to make something lasting in her poetry, to give life to her poems so they would outlast transitory experience.

V

CONCLUSION

Dickinson's poetry served as a way to go beyond time, to remain untouched by mortality. Her life seems to have been deliberately organized to achieve the goal of immortality. Though the myths which surround Dickinson the woman have at times clouded the achievement of the poet, Dickinson chose her life and her life's work deliberately, calculating the best way to get what she wanted. "Given her vocation, she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies" (Rich 52). One "necessary economy" that Dickinson undertook was to minimize social, extroverted community-oriented activities in order to emphasize an interior existence, the life of the mind.

Her quest for immortality can be seen in "Some--Work for Immortality" (#406) where she describes how most people settle for time but others look for something greater:

> Some--Work for Immortality--
> The Chiefer part, for Time--
> He--Compensates--immediately--
> The former--Checks--on Fame--
>
> Slow Gold--but Everlasting--
> The Bullion of Today--

Contrasted with the Currency
of Immortality--

A Beggar--Here and There--
Is gifted to discern
Beyond the Broker's insight--
One's--Money--One's--the Mine--
(#406).

Dickinson's poetry was geared toward earning "the Currency/Of Immortality--." As she was well aware, there are few individuals who are "gifted to discern/Beyond the Broker's insight--" (#406). Everyday time, mortality, is only paper-thin and finite, "Money;" but "Immortality" is "the Mine" from which springs all true value. It is from this "Mine" that Dickinson wished to earn an "Everlasting . . . Currency." Dickinson's quest for "Immortality" can be seen as the result of her poetic "witchcraft." When she discovered the "witches" who wrote poetry before her, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickinson discovered that their books of poetry contained "an Element/Like Deity--to keep" (#593). Poetry had an intrinsic power, a magical and captivating power that would outlast even its creator: "Magicians be asleep--" but the "Magic" will never disappear (#593).

Once Dickinson discovered "witchcraft" and was initiated into its practices, she could question and then defy conventionally-accepted beliefs. In her poetry, Dickinson could defy the tyrannies of God and religious convention, and in her defiance she slipped even deeper into the role of "poet-witch."

Just as witches used language to cast spells, to change the world in some way or affect another person in a physical way, Dickinson used poetry to wrought changes in the world and in her readers. She gave life to words hence becoming a creator to rival the Creator. The witches of colonial New England were seen as the center of "the struggle between God and Satan for human souls" (Karlsen 119). For a poet-witch like Dickinson, this struggle became not a physical one, as her Puritan predecessors feared, but a psychological struggle to come to terms with her own human despair of mortality.

Dickinson's poems provided her with a way to thwart death. As she manipulated language by creating "spells" that gave life to words, Dickinson worked a "magic" that would allow her to overstep her own mortality. Though there is no way to live forever, Dickinson found a way to have immortality. She wrote poems. In a way, the poet-witch thwarted both God and Satan. She took her soul into her own hands and carved out a personal immortality, a heaven and a hell all her own.

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