

## “THERE IS A MORN BY MEN UNSEEN”: A CLOSE READING OF DICKINSON’S PARADISE

## “THERE IS A MORN BY MEN UNSEEN”: UMA LEITURA CERRADA DO PARAÍSO DE DICKINSON

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**Abstract:** Emily Dickinson’s poem “There is a morn by men unseen” (Fr13) has been interpreted by feminist critics as a manifestation of the poet’s stance against patriarchy, arguing she drew a paradise men could not access. While in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar state it depicts “a female Easter, an apocalyptic day of resurrection on which women would rise from the grave of gender in which Victorian society had buried them alive” (p. 646), Wendy Barker asserts it portrays “unrepressed female energy” (1987, p. 127). This paper aims to demonstrate that the critics’ conclusions arise from a problematic assumption that the word “men” was employed in this poem to refer to gender. It also questions the assertion that Dickinson approached lyric poetry as a form of self-expression. To argue for an understanding of Dickinson’s paradise as a genderless haven for creativity, we turn to a close reading of the poem as well as to other instances where she employed this word in her poetic *oeuvre*.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson. Feminist Criticism. North-American Poetry.

**Resumo:** O poema de Emily Dickinson “There is a morn by men unseen” (Fr13) foi interpretado pela crítica feminista como uma manifestação da poeta contra o patriarcado, sob o argumento de que ela delineou um paraíso inacessível aos homens. Enquanto em *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) Sandra Gilbert e Susan Gubar declaram que o poema encena uma “páscoa feminina, um dia apocalíptico de ressurreição em que as mulheres se levantariam do túmulo do gênero onde a sociedade vitoriana as enterrara vivas” (p. 646), Wendy Barker assevera que ele retrata “energia feminina não-reprimida” (1987, p. 127). Este ensaio busca demonstrar que as conclusões das pesquisadoras resultam da presunção problemática de que a palavra *men* foi empregada no poema denotando gênero. Também questionamos a afirmação de que Dickinson abordava a poesia lírica enquanto forma de auto expressão. Para defender um entendimento do paraíso de Dickinson enquanto refúgio criativo sem marcadores de gênero, nos voltamos à leitura cerrada do poema e a outras instâncias onde esta palavra foi empregada em sua obra poética.

**Palavras-chave:** Emily Dickinson. Crítica Feminista. Poesia Norte-Americana.

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“There is a morn by men unseen” (Fr13)<sup>1</sup> is one of Emily Dickinson’s earliest poems. Its manuscript was included by the poet in the first of her fascicles. It was written in the summer of 1858, according to Cristanne Miller’s *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them* (2016). In this poem, Dickinson’s speaker describes a “mystic green” full of joys. The poet employs pastoral imagery to carefully construct a bucolic utopia. Although this is not, by far, one of Dickinson’s most widely discussed poems among scholarship, it was approached by remarkable names of feminist criticism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as Wendy Barker, have written of this poem as an evidence of Dickinson’s profeminist approach to poetry and of her struggle against patriarchy. One cannot overstate the relevance of the contributions of those names to Dickinsonian studies. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to address the fact that the considerations those authors published regarding this poem appear have been originated by a problematic interpretation of the poet’s use of the word “men”. By analyzing “There is a morn by men unseen” in its entirety as well as by turning to other occurrences of the word “men” in Dickinson’s poems, it becomes difficult to turn away from the likelihood that she employed it not to denote gender – that is, to create an opposition between men and the “maids” that inhabit the paradise she describes – but rather to refer to mankind, humanity as a whole.

In *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them* (2016), Cristanne Miller tells us that the word “chrysolite”, which appears in line 17, denotes a “gemstone mentioned several times in the Bible, including in Revelation”. Miller also reminds the reader that Emily Dickinson told Thomas Wentworth Higginson that she read ““for prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations’ (L261).” (p. 743). If one accepts the possibility of a biblical allusion in Dickinson’s formidable paradise, it is arguable that she borrowed not only her chrysolite from scriptural imagery, but also that her paradise

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<sup>1</sup> This paper adheres to the citation format recommended by the Emily Dickinson International Society. Numeration of Emily Dickinson’s poems follows R. W. Franklin’s edition (1998). Each citation is composed by “Fr” followed by the number of the poem. Letters are cited according to the numeration provided by Thomas H. Johnson’s edition (1958), with “L” preceding the letter number.

could somehow allude to the one promised in the Christian Bible. In that sense, the poet's use of the word "men" could echo the way it appears in the King James' Version of the Bible Dickinson had in her library. It has been demonstrated by Jack L. Capps's that the poet referred to this translation of the Bible 341 times in her poems and letters (1966, p. 192-3). Of those, twenty-nine references are related to the Book of Revelation. Nevertheless, the argument presented here is not that Dickinson speaks of the biblical Heaven in her poem, but that she alludes to it through her mixing of Christian and pastoral imagery to create a paradise of her own. It is a place of joy and creativity, of birds and summer, of singing and dancing.

The first stanza of the poem approached here begins with the verse "There is a morn by men unseen". The interpretation of the semantic content of word "men" will inevitably condition the way this poem is going to be read. In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which would win them a Pulitzer Award and become a seminal text in feminist literary criticism. Its final chapter, "A Woman-White: Emily Dickinson's Yarn of Pearl", approaches "There is a morn by men unseen" proposing that "the paradise her [Dickinson's] packets shadowily depict, however, is one Emily Dickinson yearned to inhabit openly, from the silent beginning of her elaborately camouflaged poetic career to its silent end" (p. 642). This introduction is an early indication that the critics do not acknowledge a speaker detached from the author in the poem, privileging an autobiographical interpretation instead. In that sense, their chosen critical method for this poem consists of pursuing the author's intention by looking for traces of what is known – or presumed – of her life. Dickinson herself asked editor and friend Thomas Higginson to observe that the *I* in her poems was not meant to be taken as an evidence that she was writing Confessional Poetry (L268). Although Gubar and Gilbert acknowledge several times throughout their text the author's stance and her famous assertion in Letter 268, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse-it does not mean-me-but a supposed person", they choose to ignore it in their analysis of Dickinson's poems. Instead, they stress the properties and conventions of Lyric Poetry as

a form of personal address. In that sense, Páraic Finnerty's article "‘It Does Not Mean Me, But a Supposed Person’: Browning, Dickinson, and the Dramatic Lyric" (2014) offers a great contribution to a better understanding of Dickinson's poetic project by proposing that

Following [Robert] Browning, Dickinson constructs speakers whose identities are divided, contradictory, and fragmented, and, in so doing, she further impersonalizes the personal lyric by creating the possibility of a difference between what her speakers say and what her poems mean. (p. 264)

Finnerty explores Browning's reception in America and cites Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson to demonstrate that both identified as readers and admirers of the English poet. In that context, Dickinson's claim to be writing as a "supposed person" in her poems likely intended to invite Higginson to read her lyric poems in the same way he approached Browning's, recognizing the innovations brought about by the Dramatic Lyric. Finnerty spots a gap in Dickinsonian studies:

While most critics have abandoned the naive assumption that Dickinson's poems are unmediated expressions of her thoughts and emotions, few have explored the idea of Dickinson as a skilled crafter of characters who disappears behind her creations. Eberwein and Phillips, for example, have examined Dickinson's use of diverse personae and noted the way Victorian poetry facilitated her adoption of 'the voices of imagined characters', her entering 'vicariously into situations remote from her own life' and bringing of 'a substantial measure of dramatic objectivity into her apparently subjective verse' (Eberwein, 1985: 95; Phillips, 1988). Her claim to be writing lyrics *à la* Browning, however, has been ignored. Typically, scholars agree with Richard Sewall that, although Dickinson 'found encouragement in Browning's distinctive form, her themes or preoccupations were different from his, her tone was habitually more lyric, and she had very little of his interest in creating characters' (Sewall, 1974: 716). Such an assessment rests on a twentieth-century understanding of the type of poetry Browning was writing, namely, that he was the innovative practitioner of dramatic monologues rather than the composer of dramatic lyrics. (2014, p. 270)

This contextual analysis further complicates Gilbert and Gubar's choice of ignoring – and even repelling – Dickinson's own words. The problem is not necessarily that their study disregards something the poet herself declared, as the poems can be studied by addressing exclusively the materiality of the text. The issue is that, while attempting to trace the author's intention, the critics ignore Dickinson's own voice.

Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar attempt to establish interpretations that go beyond the writing of the poems, aiming to establish something about Dickinson's character and personality. In that sense, if there is an interest in investigating the author's intention – a complicated effort in itself – Gilbert and Gubar turn away from any clear evidence Dickinson provides as well as from a heavy load of contextual information we have available. The critics present the writing of prose fiction as “a far more selfless occupation than the composition of lyric poetry” (p. 547), as

The novelist in a sense says "they": she works in a third person form even when constructing a first-person narrative. But the poet, even when writing in the third person, says "I." Artists from Shakespeare to Yeats and T. S. Eliot have of course qualified this "I," often emphasizing, as Eliot does, the "depersonalization" or "extinction of personality" involved in the poet's construction of an artful, masklike persona, or insisting, as Dickinson herself did, that the speaker of poems is a "supposed person." Nevertheless, the lyric poem acts as if it is an "effusion" (in the nineteenth-century sense) from a strong and assertive "I," a central self that is forcefully defined, whether real or imaginary. The novel, on the other hand, allows-even encourages-just the self-effacing withdrawal that society fosters in women. Where the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself as a subject, the novelist must see herself in some sense as an object, if she casts herself as a participant in the action. In constructing a narrative voice, moreover, she must as a rule disguise or repress her subjectivity. (...) If, as Joyce Carol Oates once suggested, fiction is a kind of structured daydreaming, lyric poetry is potentially, as Keats said, like "Adam's dream-he awoke and found it truth." Even if the poet's "I," then, is a "supposed person," the intensity of her dangerous impersonation of this creature may cause her to take her own metaphors literally, enact her themes herself: just as Donne really slept in his coffin, Emily Dickinson really wore white dresses for twenty years, and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton really gassed themselves. (1979, p. 549)

The argument here is slightly confusing. The critics undergo an intricate routine of mental acrobatics to justify reading Dickinson's poems under an autobiographical light, going so far as to suggest that a sort of psychological instability is inherent to writing lyric poetry. Furthermore, the influence of Robert Browning's dramatic lyric is not even considered. While Browning's innovation caused bewilderment for some 19<sup>th</sup> century readers, it was widely accessible and addressed by scholarship by the time Gilbert and Gubar published their book. About Browning's ground-breaking approach to lyric poetry, Finnerty tells us:

This poetic innovation caused so much confusion that, from 1842, he began including the following definition in which he explained that his poems were 'Dramatic Pieces, being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine' (Browning, 1991: II, 345). (2014, p. 270)

It is remarkable how similar Browning's explanation of his poetry sounds compared to Dickinson's letter to Higginson explaining hers. Given the context, it remains unclear why, precisely, the lyric poet – especially in Dickinson's case – would be “continually aware of herself as a subject” while writing, to the point of growing unable to differentiate between herself and the characters created from her poems. Gubar and Gilbert share their reading of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to justify their understanding of women's choice of writing novels over poetry. Nevertheless, Woolf's text – which specifically addresses nineteenth-century women writers in the section Gubar and Gilbert allude to – never proposes as an explanation for the high number of women novelists that a woman would be in danger of taking her own metaphors literally if she wrote lyric poetry. Woolf states that it was probably due to the fact nineteenth-century women had to write in the common sitting-room, thus being often interrupted, that they became novel writers:

Here, then, one had reached the early nineteenth century. And here, for the first time, I found several shelves given up entirely to the works of women. But why, I could not help asking, as I ran my eyes over them, were they, with very few exceptions, all novels? The original impulse was to poetry. The 'supreme head of song' was a poetess. Both in France and in England the women poets precede the women novelists. Moreover, I thought, looking at the four famous names, what had George Eliot in common with Emily Bronte? Did not Charlotte Bronte fail entirely to understand Jane Austen? Save for the possibly relevant fact that not one of them had a child, four more incongruous characters could not have met together in a room - so much so that it is tempting to invent a meeting and a dialogue between them. Yet by some strange force they were all compelled when they wrote, to write novels. Had it something to do with being born of the middle class, I asked; and with the fact, which Miss Emily Davies a little later was so strikingly to demonstrate, that the middle-class family in the early nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them? If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain, '-women never have an half hour . . . that they can call their own' - she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. (1929, p. 50)

Woolf comments on how “all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion.” (1929, p. 50). Therefore, with that sort of training, it was only natural novel-writing would come more easily to women. Woolf never opposes the observation of others and self-expression the way Gilbert and Gubar do. Nevertheless, they use this interpretation of Woolf’s text as basis for their interpretation of Dickinson’s poem. The anachronism of their analysis of Dickinson is intensified by the citation of Simone de Beauvoir to propose a biographical reading of “There is a morn by men unseen”:

If, as Simone de Beauvoir convincingly speculates, a virgin woman like Emily Dickinson may seem to be inhabited by spiders and sorcery, this powerful vision explains her commitment to virginity, "the marriage with the demon" within herself that is the strength behind her sorcery. (p. 643)

When Gilbert and Gubar cite possible influences for Dickinson, they present us with women writers who created similar poetic paradises, including Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the latter a poet Dickinson frequently referenced and in whose memory she wrote the poem “I think I was enchanted” (Fr627). The difference would be, according to the critics, that while the other poets had to renounce to their paradise, Dickinson does not do so. It is also a “defiantly female” place, they say, to the point we must suspect Dickinson is describing a “female Easter, an apocalyptic day of resurrection on which women would rise from the grave of gender in which Victorian society had buried them alive, and enter a paradise of ‘Ecstasy-and Dell-’.” (p. 645). This interpretation of Dickinson’s poem as depicting a paradise exclusively inhabited by women does not find a steady support on the materiality of the text. The only quotation the critics offer at this point – “Ecstasy – and Dell –” – does not back their claim for a gender-oriented reading. This brief overview of Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of Dickinson’s poems raises a few issues. The main one is that the critics read this poem as being “defiantly female”, a notion Wendy Barker is going to echo when she calls it Dickinson’s “female paradise” (1987, p. 126). Both analyses are based on the unlikely

chance that the poet was referring to gender when she employed the word “men” on the first line of her poem. The possibility for a different interpretation is not even considered.

A close reading of “There is a morn by men unseen” does not provide the image of defiant female energy the critics propose. If one does not read the word “men” as a counterpoint to the word “maids”, the claim for gender as an organizing principle for the poem all but disappears. It is significant that the word “men” appears in eighty-two of Dickinson’s poems.<sup>2</sup> Further along this paper, such occurrences are going to be addressed. The first stanza of the poem is dedicated to establishing the scenery and the action that takes place in Dickinson’s speaker’s paradise. It is first presented as a “morn by men unseen”. The second line presents the reader with the “maids” who have been interpreted by the aforementioned critics as a counterpoint to the “men” who appear in the first. While “men” have never seen this morn, the maids belong in the “remoter green”. All the actions that are going to be presented throughout the first stanza are executed by those women. The word “maids” acts as subject for “keep their seraphic May” as well as for “employ their holiday”. It is in the first stanza that the notion that “men” refers to gender originates, as well as the idea that this is a women-only paradise. Nevertheless, even if one adhered to this interpretation, it should be stressed that Dickinson’s speaker – interpreted by Gilbert and Gubar as Dickinson herself – does not experience this place either. The speaker is reporting from the outside, narrating a revelry or a tale passed on by others. In that sense, the announcer stands with the men who have not gained access to this paradise.

While the first stanza of “There is a morn by men unseen” is dedicated to announcing a place humanity has not yet seen and the enjoyable ways – dancing and playing – the maids who live there “employ their holiday”, the second one introduces the notion that this does not take place in the same dimension ordinary life did. The speaker makes it clear that the inhabitants of this paradise “walk no more the village street”, while the birds who live there are the ones who sought the sun when “last year’s distaff idle

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<sup>2</sup> Instances where the word appears in its singular form – “man” – as well as in compound nouns such as “kinsmen”, “gentlemen”, “workmen”, “footmen”, “horsemen”, “clergymen”, “merchantmen”, “bargemen” and “countrymen”, where not included in this count.



hung / And summer's brows were bound". The image of the distaff could certainly strengthen the argument for an understanding of this as a feminine paradise. Spinning was indeed an activity predominantly performed by – unmarried – women and the word "distaff" was even employed as an adjective to refer to the matrilineal branch of a family. Furthermore, a synonym for "spinster" in its derogatory sense would be the term "old maid", as Douglas Harper tells us in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*. The possible association of the word "maids" from the first stanza with the reference to the distaff makes the feminist critics' readings more credible as far one could argue that Dickinson evokes enough symbols connected to femininity to justify their conclusions. Nevertheless, the arguments for a feminine paradise that were posited by them are not centered around this interesting possibility of a semantic connection. It should be stressed that even if one follows this approach to the poem, it appears that Dickinson's would not be a women-only, but rather a women-governed paradise. The poet refers to the "people" who inhabit the mystic green in the final stanza. Finally, in the image of the deserted distaff there appears to be a much bigger claim for the abandonment of commonplace, tedious activities in favor to those that would best suit a poet – a bird – who last summer abandoned the distaff and sought the sun. This could be read as a metaphor for a kind of death, be it literal or figurative.

The third stanza celebrates the new order the world of the "different dawn" establishes, one the speaker had never seen before. It is the imagery Dickinson chooses to evoke here that is interesting: "As if the stars some summer night / Should swing their cups of Chrysolite – / And revel till the day –". It is a picture of complete, unrestrained freedom, but the allusion to Chrysolite is what interest us in our interpretation of Dickinson's construction of meaning throughout the poem. *Dictionary.com* offers the following definition for this word: "Mineralogy. any of a group of magnesium iron silicates,  $(Mg,Fe)_2SiO_4$ , occurring in olive-green to gray-green masses as an important constituent of basic igneous rocks". However, as it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Cristanne Miller included a note in *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them* stating that chrysolite is "a gemstone mentioned several times in the

Bible, including in Revelation.” (2016, p. 743) and that Dickinson wrote to Higginson mentioning the Book of Revelation as one of her favorite readings. The possibility of an allusion to the final biblical book is thought-provoking as Dickinson’s speaker is clearly speaking of a world not yet accessible to the listener or reader, an afterlife. In that sense, this can be interpreted as a Scripture-inspired Dickinsonian rendition of a post-apocalyptic Heaven. Approaching “What is – ‘Paradise’” (Fr241), another poem that constructs a vision of a poetic heaven, Miller notes that it “alludes to Revelation 7:16–17 and 21:19, which claim the saved shall neither hunger nor thirst and that the “first foundation” of the wall of the new Jerusalem is garnished with jasper.” (2016, p. 749). While in this poem Dickinson’s speaker wonders about what heaven would be like, in “There is a morn by men unseen” a vision of one is proposed.

Dickinson’s employment of the word “maids” beckons special attention. Besides the possibility of linking this word with the distaff, it can be read as being in tune with pastoral codes of imagery the poet explores in this work as a nod to the milkmaids, for instance. It should also be stressed that, throughout her poetic works, Dickinson usually employs symmetry when presenting binary divisions of gender. That is, she will usually employ the male and female variants of the same noun. In that sense, an opposition between men and maids would be somewhat unlikely. Examples of that symmetry occur in poems such as “It’s such a little thing to weep –” (Fr220), where Dickinson makes an explicit reference to gender by citing men and women: “We men and women die!”. The same happens in “Read – Sweet – how others – strove –” (Fr323), with a reference to the “Brave names of Men – / And Celestial Women –”. In “Those fair – fictitious People –” (Fr369), the employment of the word “Women” in the second line prepares the reader to take the word “men”, in the fourth line as referring to gender, as does the syntactic structure of the first stanza:

Those fair – fictitious People –  
The Women – plucked away  
From our familiar Lifetime –  
The Men of Ivory –

It is also noteworthy that in the second stanza the speaker refers to boys and girls. In “Endow the Living – with the Tears –” (Fr657), Dickinson’s speaker divides the dead between men and women. In “It will be Summer – eventually.” (Fr374), the speaker mentions “Ladies – with parasols –” as well as “Sauntering Gentlemen – with Canes”. The same pairing takes place in “This quiet Dust was Gentlemen and Ladies” (Fr1090), a poem that also makes reference to “Lads and Girls –”. Poems that bring both the word “men” and the word “maid” do not pair them to establish gender oppositions. In “The Fingers of the Light” (Fr1015), the speaker states the noise made by the Guest awoke “Maid and Man”. One should take note those words refer to specific characters in the poem, not to gender categories. Another interesting occurrence takes place in “Taken from men – this morning –” (Fr34), where the speaker establishes an opposition between men and gods – mortality and eternity – not between men and maids. A maid has died. The speaker also alludes to the fact several other people have passed away lately, so all the rooms in Eden must be full. This person was taken from and carried by men and received by the gods in a different realm. In that sense, the word “men” clearly refers to mankind, those she left behind:

Taken from men – this morning –  
Carried by men today –  
Met by the Gods with banners –  
Who marshalled her away –

One little maid – from playmates –  
One little mind from school –  
There must be guests in Eden –  
All the rooms are full –

Far – as the East from Even –  
Dim – as the border star –  
Courtiers quaint, in Kingdoms  
Our departed are.

After addressing issues of symmetry in Dickinson’s verse, it is interesting to lean over the way the word “men” appears in her poems. In most of its eighty-two appearances, “men” is employed to refer to humanity, not to human males. “Taken from men – this morning” (Fr34), a poem approached in the previous paragraph, can be listed

as a starting point here. It appears on Dickinson's Fascicle Three, Sheet Four, and it was written circa autumn 1858. Therefore, the poet wrote it not long after "There is a morn by men unseen". In both the word "men" appears to refer to mankind and both also employ the word "maid" / "maids". Dickinson wrote several poems dealing with a transit towards a different realm of existence, naming paradises and places unknown to humanity. In some of those poems, she employs the word "men" and it usually refers to people in general. In some of those works Dickinson recurs to biblical allusions. "You're right – "the way *is* narrow" –" (Fr249) is one of such poems. The very notion of a narrow way alludes to the biblical assertion that the path mankind will tread towards eternity in Heaven is not an easy one. Cristanne Miller cites these sources in her notes for this poem: "in Matthew 7:14, 'Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.' See also Luke 13:24." (2016, p. 750). In the final stanza, the speaker wonders what will become of humanity after treading the narrow way:

And after that – there's Heaven –  
The Good man's – "Dividend" –  
And Bad men – "go to Jail" –  
I guess –

The skeptical tone that permeates this stanza is quite Dickinsonian and worthy of further discussion, but since our aim is to discuss the poet's treatment of the word "men", it suffices to say that it is clear that she refers to both men and women when her speaker wonders what the destiny of "Bad men" will be.

Dickinson's use of the word "men" in "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad –" (Fr334) is thought-provoking. Although the speaker appears as detached from "men" in line 8 – "Permitted men – and me –", which could maybe point towards gender, this is one of the poems for which the poet left us more than one version. A consultation to The Emily Dickinson Archive website tells us its manuscript is kept by the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The webpage also shares its publication history, taken from Franklin's Variorum Edition:

Higginson, *Christian Union*, 42 (25 September 1890), 393, in part, as two eight-line stanzas, from his copy (B) but with readings from the fascicle (A). *Poems* (1890), 96-97, in part, from the fascicle (A), as five stanzas of 4, 4, 4, 4, and 5 lines; the alternative for line 8 was adopted. CP (1924), 122, with "comb" substituted for "brush" in line 6, from Susan's annotation deriving in turn from the text sent to her. In *Poems* (1930), 104-5, the text sent to Susan (D), arranged as six quatrains and a concluding stanza of five lines, replaced the one that had descended from *Poems* (1890); a note explained that three omitted stanzas were thus restored. *Poems* (1955), 245-49 (A, B principal, C); CP (1960), 151-52 (B). MB (1981), 253-55 (A), in facsimile. (J321). *Franklin Variorum* 1998 (F334A).

The alternative for line 8 mentioned in this passage consists of the replacement of the word "men" by the word "Gods". If one is to consider the poem under the light of Dickinson's poetic strategy of "choosing not choosing", as Sharon Cameron proposes,<sup>3</sup> it is possible to infer that it is from humanity that the speaker is gathering some distance from, not necessarily the male gender. The alternative version reminds the reader of other instances in Dickinson's poetry where men and gods are linked within the same poem to design an opposition, such as in "Taken from men – this morning –". Another good example of Dickinson's use of the word "men" takes place in "Of Bronze – and Blaze –" (Fr319). The poem projects into the future a time where the speaker – apparently a flower – will "take vaster attitudes – / And strut upon my stem – / Disdaining Men, and Oxygen, / For Arrogance of them –". By placing Men and Oxygen as equivalents, the speaker proposes an inversion of everything one would take for granted as being significant and crucial to life. None of it matters to her as an absolute unconcern "Infects my simple spirit / With Taints of Majesty –". The poem's final stanza echoes "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260) as the flower declares that as the centuries pass, and she becomes an island in "dishonored grass", only daisies – or beetles in the alternative Dickinson provides in the manuscript – will know her name. The word "men" works to relativize in the eyes of the flower the weight of everything humanity values most.

In "A Toad, can die of Light –" (Fr419), Dickinson's speaker declares death is "the Common Right / Of Toads and Men –" in a clear comparison between the

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<sup>3</sup> Cameron writes: "It is not merely that Dickinson was uncertain, but that she refused to make up her mind about how her poems should be read. This refusal – another aspect of what I have called choosing not to choose – is crucial to the problematic of her poetry" (1992, p. 40).

amphibian creatures and humanity. “This World is not conclusion.” (Fr373) – one of the poems Dickinson kept entirely private, according to Cristanne Miller (2016, p. 15) – articulates the speaker’s doubts and skepticism towards the established Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, this constitutes yet another appearance of the theme of a world to come or an afterlife in Dickinson’s poems. Once more the word “men” is employed to refer to people in general, as the speaker refers to what human beings have borne to be considered deserving of paradise. “A train went through a burial gate” (Fr397) also deals with a passing and presents the image of the bird – often employed by Dickinson as a symbol for the poet (BARKER, 1987, p. 114) – singing his elegy as: “Doubtless, he thought it meet of him / To say good bye to men.”. If one accepts the bird as a metaphor for the poet herself, it is also interesting that Dickinson writes him as being male, which could suggest she was not interested in establishing or differentiating between genders in this poem at all. The employment of male forms to refer to the main character presented in the poem also shows Dickinson writing in a degenderized manner, or that at least her speakers’ gender may vary. In “The Soul that hath a Guest,” (Fr592), the second quatrain brings the word “himself” referring to “The Soul”:

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

And Courtesy forbids  
The Host’s departure – when  
Upon Himself – be visiting  
The Mightiest – of Men –

The issue of flexible gender markers becomes even more flagrant when one thinks of Dickinson’s famous “The Soul selects her own Society –” (Fr409) where a Soul much like the one described in “The Soul that hath a Guest,” – one that is selective and exclusive – is referred to by female pronouns. Dickinson’s manuscript for this poem brings an alternative version for the last verse. “The Emperor of Men –” would replace “The Mightiest – of Men”, thus reinforcing the understanding of the word as referring to

humankind. When Dickinson works with Christian or Biblical themes, imagery and tropes, the word “men” appears to always refer to humanity. Poems such as “Prayer is the little implement” (Fr623), “What care the Dead, for Chanticleer –” (Fr624), “So well that I can live without –” (Fr682) (Jesus loved Men), “The Birds begun at Four o’clock” (Fr504), “It was a Grave, yet bore no Stone” (Fr852), and “This Consciousness that is aware” (Fr817) are all examples of that.

There is one final group amongst Dickinson’s poems that should be addressed in this paper. In those poems, the speaker is presented as one of the “men” that appear in the text. In some cases, the word seems to imply gender, while in some it does not. Nevertheless, the occurrences that seem to refer specifically to male humans are particularly interesting, as they indicate that Dickinson’s speakers can easily navigate through gender. In “How firm eternity must look” (Fr1397), the first stanza reads:

How firm eternity must look  
To crumbling men like me –  
The only adamant Estate  
In all Identity –

This is a great example to approach a discussion of gender in Dickinson not only because it shows a speaker that identifies himself as one of the “crumbling men”, but also in the sense that Dickinson offers an alternative version for the second line which would end in “thee”, not “me”. Thus, the speaker can both share the view proposed by the poem and place himself outside of it. This instance of “choosing not choosing” is in tune with the poem’s proposal that the only adamant “Estate” – which could easily be confused with the word “state” – in someone’s identity would be “eternity”, the promise of an after-life, perhaps. In the present, identity and all its peculiarities are “crumbling”. The sense of uncertainty that permeates the poem makes it impossible for the reader to fully apprehend the speaker. Another interesting example of the flexibility of gender in Dickinson’s speakers come in “The Savior must have been” (Fr1538). Cristanne Miller tells us that this poem was sent by the poet to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in November 1880, “designated as ‘Christ’s Birthday,’” (2016, p. 629). Besides mentioning Jesus’s “fellow

men” – which appears to refer to his human condition, not to gender – this poem brings the following lines, where the speaker identifies himself as a boy who was friends with Christ:

The Road to Bethlehem  
Since he and I were Boys,  
Was leveled, but for that 'twould be  
A rugged Billion Miles –

The compound noun “fellow men” also appears in relation to the speaker in “Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy” (Fr1671): “Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy /And I am richer then, than all my Fellow men.”. As it was shown by the many poems approached throughout this paper, Dickinson usually employed the word “men” to refer to humanity. When she used it to express gender, the poem’s context would usually inform the reader of that or at least point towards ambiguity, as it happens in “How firm eternity must look” (Fr1397). This brief study allows us to propose a reading of “There is a morn by men unseen” where the word “maids” appears to introduce the pastoral imagery that permeate the poem, not in opposition to the word “men”.

Another possible approach to studying Dickinson’s employment of the word “men” is to analyze how it appears in a book we know she not only enjoyed reading, but one she possibly alluded to in this very poem when she employed the word “Chrysolite”: The Book of Revelation. This likely instance of intertextuality invites us to look at the way the word “men” appears throughout the *King James Version*. That is the translation Dickinson had access to, as Jack L. Capps tells us in *Emily Dickinson Reading* (1966). Capps states that “in any study of Emily Dickinson the King James version of the Bible is a basic reference, for its pervasive influence upon both her life and letters is readily apparent.” (p. 27). About the influence of this book upon Dickinson’s writing, the critic also tells us that

Her affinity for the idiom of the King James version accounts for the fact that her style and tone are not so easily compared to the writing of her American contemporaries as they are to that of seventeenth-century English divines, whose language was both chronologically and professionally close to that of



the newly translated Bible and whose works usually depended heavily upon it as a model. Emily Dickinson relished the antique flavor of the King James version and treated the Bible with the informal familiarity that characterized her references to God. "Guess I and the Bible will move to some old fashioned spot where we'll feel at Home," she wrote Mrs. Holland. Fortunately, Amherst proved to be sufficiently "old fashioned" to allow her the continued companionship of the Bible without having to move. And, as a result of her undiminished preference for the Scriptures, biblical quotations in her letters and poems far exceed references to any other source or author. Of the thirty-eight books of the Bible to which Emily Dickinson referred one or more times in her poems and letters, the Gospels, Revelation, and Genesis are most often cited. (1966, p. 29-30)

The word "men" appears several times throughout the Book of Revelation in the *King James Version*. It is usually employed by the narrator to describe his prophetic visions of the woes that are going to befall humanity – regardless of gender – before the second coming of Christ, as the selected examples below demonstrate:

And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter. (Rev. 8.11)

And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. (Rev. 9.6)

By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths. (Rev. 9.18)

And the same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand: and the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven. (Rev. 11.13)

And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. (Rev. 16.18)

In all the verses cited above, it is quite clear that "men" could easily be replaced by the words "people" or "humankind". Jack Capps has proposed that Dickinson's "affinity for the Scripture is reflected in her choice of words and metaphors as well as in her aphoristic style" (1966, p. 58). Considering the possible intertextuality in the matter of the Chrysolite, it becomes difficult to disregard the likelihood that when Emily Dickinson's speaker declares that "There is a morn by men unseen", he/she refers not to gender, but to the human inhabitants of the world we live in. This argument is strengthened by the fact

that the last stanza refers to the “People upon that mystic green –”, not to any specific gender. One could even interpret the fact Dickinson places the only trochee in a poem made of iambs at the start of this verse – precisely by employing the word “people” – to call attention to those who have already gained access to such paradise. Finally, one should take note that the speaker does not place him or herself there, as the final four lines tell us:

I ask, each new May morn.  
I wait thy far – fantastic bells –  
Announcing me in other dells –  
Unto the different dawn!  
(Fr13)

While the announcer of this paradise knows much about it – as a prophet would – he or she still wishes to gain access to this place. It is clear a transition must take place before one can enter this “different dawn” and the speaker is waiting for the bells that will announce his or her acceptance there. While the trochee in “people” interrupts the homogeneity of the iambic pattern, this final quatrain is disruptive of the rhyme scheme Dickinson constructed throughout the previous stanzas: AABCCB is not fulfilled here as “May morn” and “different dawn” do not rhyme. A possible interpretation for this could be that Dickinson wished to demonstrate the place the speaker is in now is not in tune with the one he or she wishes to inhabit next. The fact she employed alliteration in both verses could maybe tell us that they are realms that can be measured against each other but are in harmony only with their surroundings. Thinking of the prophetic tone Dickinson’s poem shares with the Book of Revelation, it is pertinent to turn to its chapter 21, which bears the title “A New Heaven and a New Earth” in the *King James Version*. It presents the same transition from the employment of the word “men” towards the use of the word “people” that takes place in Dickinson’s “There is a morn by men unseen”:

1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.  
2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Rev. 21.1-4)

Considering the context in which Dickinson's "There is a morn by men unseen" was written, reading it as referring to gender strikes one as a far-fetched interpretation. While this paper's aim was not to attempt to impose a univocal reading for Dickinson's poem, it appears that enough evidence has been gathered and presented throughout this text to support the claim that reading the word "men" in this poem as referring to humankind is a perfectly reasonable interpretive choice. This stance is supported by the structure of the poem, other occurrences of the word "men" throughout Dickinson's poetic *oeuvre* as well as by her possible allusion to the Book of Revelation. Although it is possible to read the poem under the light of feminist criticism, it seems fit to interpret "the morn by men unseen" as a place free from constraints and unwanted obligations, one any person will eventually be able to access. Dickinson's paradise sounds like the poet's own rendition of Heaven, a paradise that is filled with people – not just women – who dance and play games freely. In "Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go", Robert Weisbuch offers us valuable advice as he urges Dickinson's readers to "unclench a mental fist" and let go of interpretive habits when reading her works:

Not pointing, you will be embraced by multitudes of meaning. Not prying, you will discover intimacies. Not settling for one truth, you can rush toward revelations. Each of these renunciations provides, lets you "gather," something of that freed bounty by which Dickinson makes poetry and makes over your thought. (1998, p. 197)

This is the kind of exercise this paper aimed to propose by offering a different reading for "There is a morn by men unseen". The idea was not to deny the one presented by the celebrated feminist critics, but to address its problems and anachronisms as well as the

likelihood that Dickinson employed the word “men” not to “shut the door” at the face of one gender, but to announce a poetic vision of a world to come.

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