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“Tell all the truth but tell it slant—”: An Exploration of the Role of Gender in the Formal Experimental Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and H.D.

Madeline Burns
Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, madeline.burns@trincoll.edu

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant—”: An Exploration of the Role of Gender in the Formal Experimental Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and H.D.

submitted by

Madeline Burns 2016

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Director: Christopher Hager
Reader: Katherine Bergren
Reader: Daniel Mrozowski
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Introduction

Experimental writing expresses discontent and pushes against rules and standards that confine and limit expression. Feminist principles operate in a similar manner, by combatting the stereotypes that oppress women and presenting new avenues of thought that are more progressive in their portrayal of women. Being a female writer and exploring formal experimentation in writing, therefore, often go together. Experimental writing has long been the language of the oppressed. For women, experimentation with form often occurs in poetry, which places form at the forefront. As oppressed groups of people often have to speak and write indirectly, maneuvering around dominant forms of thought, this experimentation with form is often subliminal. One of Emily Dickinson’s most well-known poems, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—” F1263, explores the idea of exposing the truth, but concealing it beneath layers of traditional thought:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —

For Dickinson, “telling it slant” means talking in cryptic, metaphorical language, creating complex, intangible images, rejecting the traditional iambic pentameter used in poetry during her
time, experimenting with slant rhyme, capitalizing words seemingly at random, making up words, using dashes where other poets would use periods, commas, or other forms of punctuation, and in general breaking free of the literary conventions of nineteenth century America. Dickinson’s conception of “slanting” the truth, however, can be applied not only to her own experimentation with form, but also to the experimentation of other American female poets. In this thesis, I will examine works by Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and H.D. as the defining figures of a tradition of experimental poetry.

The origins of my project were in investigating the relationship between the gender of these poets and their choice to write experimental poetry. I wanted to explore these women’s primary objectives for writing experimental literature. Were they writing for a specific audience? How was each poet’s approach to experimentation with form unique to that point in history? Were they attempting to rewrite the literary canon? Were they opening doors for future generations of women writers? By gendering the experimental, I wanted to answer questions not only about these specific women and their approaches to poetic form, but also about why the circumstances of being a female poet and employing formal experimentation in writing are so often interconnected. To do this, I realized, I had to view these poets not as anomalies, but as the foundation for a larger literary canon.

Literary canons are, by nature, both subjective and exclusive. Their formation is representative of social norms and individual perspectives that dictate which texts and writers are “in” and which are “out”. Much like a high school clique, the ones on the outside are often either misunderstood or marginalized. Texts and writers that are both misunderstood and marginalized are often left out of even the most comprehensive canons. The misplacement or complete omission from literary canons of women writers who experiment with form is an example of this
phenomenon. The unfamiliar form of the texts, coupled with the marginalized status of the 
women writing them, makes them “other,” and difficult to fit within the confines of previously 
determined boxes. In the rare instances that their work is included within the body of a literary 
canon, it is either within the canon of feminist – but not experimental – literature, or the canon of 
experimental – but traditionally masculine – literature. The intersection of their gender and their 
experimentalism is ignored.

This thesis seeks to propose a canon of formal experimental American female poets from 
1800 – 1950. In the three chapters of this thesis, I have identified the three poets whom I 
consider to be the “foremothers” of this larger tradition as Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and 
H.D. The chapters are ordered chronologically, beginning with Emily Dickinson, followed by 
Gertrude Stein, and concluding with H.D., so as to explicate patterns of influence between the 
three poets. There are many similarities between the three women that justify placing them 
together in one canon. All three entered the sphere of higher education but never graduated: 
Dickinson is Mount Holyoke’s most famous dropout, H.D. failed out of Bryn Mawr, and Stein 
attended John Hopkins Medical School briefly before dropping out. This rejection of institutions 
can be seen throughout all of their work. All three are also nonheterocentric, and are either 
alleged to have engaged, or openly engaged, in intimate relationships with women. Yet neither of 
these parallels, though relevant to their work, is as important to the shaping of this literary canon 
as their cohesions in experimentation with form in ways that defy the traditional gendered, 
heteronormative, and patriarchal norms of their time.

I begin with Dickinson both to set up a chronological pattern of influence, but also to 
establish her as the lynchpin in this canon. In her book, *Queer Poetics – Five Modernist Women 
Writers*, Mary E. Galvin identifies Dickinson’s experimentation with form as the foundation for
the larger canon of modernist queer female poets, comprised of Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.:

Dickinson inhabited the hymn meter—the most solid and single-minded form available to her—and disrupted syntax, formal meter, and rhyme. In doing so, she transformed the duplicity of language from a medium of coding and disguise into a technique for questioning and undermining the certainty of all boundaries, all categorical distinctions. These techniques also provided the poetic groundwork for the modernists whose poetics comprise the rest of my study. (Galvin 7)

Galvin’s case for the construction of this canon is that the poets in this grouping are all “nonheterocentric” in their identities, and that their identities as queer women, or at least women who reject heteronormative convention, allow them to experiment with form in the same way they experiment with sexuality. Although Galvin identifies Dickinson as the cornerstone in this canon, she excludes her from the canon itself, suggesting that more genuine and full-fledged experimentation with form materializes in later modernist writing as a result of Dickinson’s influence. In this thesis, I argue that Dickinson, Stein, and H.D. each contributed to the canon’s development, and that their work should be viewed as more than just a primitive experimental form that precedes more authentic, modern feminist works. Additionally, while these women’s status as nonheterocentric is important when discussing their work, especially so with Stein, connecting them together in this canon solely based on that attribute of their identity ignores many other nontraditional ideologies represented in their experimentation with form.

The act of rewriting literary canons requires both an extrication from any predisposed ideas about the writers and their texts, and an engagement with these predisposed ideas in order to consider the ways in which literary canons can be exclusionary. Scholars attempting to
reshape literary canons must first address the limitations of previously defined canons before endeavoring to reconstruct them into more comprehensive and accurate representations of that field of literature. In the introduction to each chapter, therefore, I debunk common misconceptions about each poet. After reframing each poet’s work, my chapter outlines her experimentation with form and how it relates to her explication of certain nontraditional ideologies during her time period – predominantly those pertaining to feminist dogmas, androgynous and non-binary depictions of gender, the rejection of heternormative structures, and progressive explorations of sexuality.

In chapter one, I discuss Dickinson’s subversion of male-controlled and sexist norms and assertion of female authority through her experimentation with form. I also explore her non-binary depictions of gender in her employment of androgynous pronouns and deconstruction of gendered paradigms. I diverge, briefly, from analyses of her experimentation with form in order to consider her approach to maintaining an autonomous voice as a female poet, and preserving the radical and subversive nature of her poetry, through her aversion to publication. This chapter focuses primarily on Dickinson’s engagement with inherent poetic forms, and her attempts to deviate from masculine and gendered thoughts by playing with and slanting traditional poetic form.

In chapter two, I focus on Stein’s experimentation with form at the level of language. Compared with Dickinson, Stein is more concerned with the structure of language than structures of poetry. I examine Stein’s approach to deconstructing and reattaching meaning to traditional structures of language through her experimentation with form. I discuss her assertion of female authority and subversion of heternormative ideologies through cookbook language, and her use of the continuous present as a rejection of heteronormative language. I explore her use of
repetition and juxtaposition to reinvent meaning in traditional constructions of language, and I emphasize the influence of visual culture on her portrayal of feminine identity and female empowerment in language.

In chapter three, I analyze H.D.’s portrayal of feminist ideologies through her employment of palimpsestic form. I present her revival of the chthonic pantheon of female earth goddesses and her implementation of feminist revisionist mythology within the framework of palimpsestic literature, arguing that she experiments with form by revitalizing earlier structures and integrating them within a modernist context. I show how her use of translation both reshapes traditional literary structures within a feminist context and also illustrates the ways that language and literature are shaped by social and culture norms. I also discuss H.D.’s rewriting of the Victorian element of the femme fatale from a modern feminist perspective.

Although these three women manipulate form to portray similar ideologies, their approaches to altering traditional linguistic and literary structures vary widely. The shifting trend in their approaches to experimenting with form can be conveyed through the key terms used to describe their objectives in experimenting with form. For Dickinson, the key terms are “tinkering,” “playing,” and “slanting,” all of which describe her subtle manipulation of social constructs through language and literary structures. Stein’s key terms are “make” and “deconstruct,” as her experimentation with form is characterized by a stripping away of the old and making it new. The key terms “translate,” “palimpsest,” and “reclaim” define H.D.’s experimentation with form, as she makes language and literature new by rehabilitating the old within a modern context. These key terms outline the arc of the thread that ties these three poets together. Each poet’s approach to formal experimentation functions as a response to the style of the poet before her. Where Dickinson is more accepting of language and presents it in new ways
to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—,” Stein rejects traditional language structures and
emphasizes the ideas of “beginning again” and “making it new.” Where Stein starts over,
stripping away the meanings of words and reconstructing new meanings, H.D. embraces ancient
forms of language and literature, and integrates these structures – through experimentation with
form – in her poetry.

In this thesis I aim to discuss not only the works of these founding mothers of the canon
of formal experimental American female poets, but also how their rejection of traditional form
opened new doors for the subsequent generations of American female experimental writers such
as Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Denise Levertov. There is an apparent pattern of influence in
the formal experimental writings of women, as the work of one writer draws upon the
experimentation of women before her. In my conclusion, I discuss some of these more modern
writers, and point to the direct influence that the work of Dickinson, Stein, and H.D. had on their
own experimentation with form, as well as the influence it continues to bear on each generation
of female experimental writers in America.
Chapter 1
“The Soul selects her own Society”: Emily Dickinson’s Subversion of Gender Roles

Emily Dickinson’s reputation in American literary history has long been that of the recluse, the woman in white tucked away in her childhood bedroom, penning her verses in a chaotic fashion on scraps of paper and then hiding them from the rest of the world. This image of Dickinson often contributes to how critics describe her poetic style. One such critic is Cindy MacKenzie, who in her essay “‘This is my letter to the World’: Emily Dickinson’s Epistolary Poetics,” discusses Dickinson’s poetic form as chaotic and uncontrolled. She cites a letter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Emily Dickinson as an accurate representation of Dickinson’s poetic work:

For all his bewilderment, Higginson’s impressions of Dickinson’s letters and verses can be construed as going directly to the heart of her poetic style: the speaker “enshrouded” in a “fiery mist”; the reader enjoying brief moments of epiphanic lucidity; the “rare sparkles of light” and “luminous flashes” revealing “thoughts of such a [quality]”; each insight emphasizing the riddling and haunted quality that characterizes the poet’s expression. (MacKenzie 12)

This reading of Dickinson’s style conforms to the image of Dickinson as a manic recluse, scrawling furiously at her desk, her form disorganized and chaotic. This depiction, however, undermines Dickinson’s authority as a woman writer, and ignores the deliberateness of her experimental writing.

More contemporary critics have started to shift away from the depiction of Dickinson as uncontrolled in order to focus instead on the intention behind her experimental decisions. In her
book, *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson’s Rhyme*, Judy Jo Small maintains that Dickinson’s art stems not from the mind of a mad genius, but from that of a thoughtful and methodical writer: “At this distance and with access to her manuscripts, it is possible to see that her fiery genius was compounded with laborious, dedicated revising of words and lines and with careful, conscious art” (Small 2). The “fiery genius” that Small refers to here comes from a letter that Dickinson wrote to Higginson in 1862, where she writes, “I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred – ” (Fr271). This letter suggests that Dickinson’s writing was uninhibited and raw – which on the surface it appears to be – but in this chapter, I explore the way she revised her work, constantly rethinking specific lines and rhymes and words, and constantly reexamining her verse based on collaborations with her closest confidants. Careful thought and reconsideration dominates her work, rather than spontaneity.

Small suggests that Dickinson’s audience has long ignored the significance behind her experimentation with form due to her status as a woman in the 19th century: “Because Dickinson was a woman, and largely removed from an artistic or poetic community, it has taken readers some time to realize that her departures from conventional form resulted not from technical ineptitude but from deliberate art” (Small 1-2). The idea that Dickinson, as a woman living in the 19th century, would purposefully experiment with form and deviate from the conventional styles of writing at the time she was writing would have been seen as outlandish by her contemporary literary peers. Even now that her deliberate experimentation with form has begun to be discussed, her status as a woman is often ignored in relation to this experimentation. The conventional pairing of Whitman and Dickinson in many critical essays and other forms of academic scholarship shows how Dickinson is most frequently separated from the tradition of
women writing. Critics have long struggled to link her gender to her experimental writing, but when the two go hand in hand, the image of the maniacal woman writer often overshadows the deliberateness of her work.

The Dickinson that I will examine in this chapter is controlled and deliberate in her formal experimentation. In this chapter, I move away from a reclusive and uncontrolled image of Dickinson, and towards a Dickinson who is both meticulous and purposeful in the way that she experiments with form. While the aim of my chapter is not primarily to deconstruct the prevailing depiction of Dickinson, by doing so, I open up new channels of discussion about the autonomy she yields in her formal decisions, as well as the subversive nature of her work.

By recognizing the careful nature of Dickinson’s artistry, one is also able to pull out the social and political messages she wove in through her experimentation with form. I argue that Dickinson is purposeful in her every word. As illustrated by her constant editing of her work, Dickinson thinks through every word and every phrase. To overlook that is to undervalue Dickinson as an artist, and to disregard the importance of her work. Her experimentation with form functions as a subversion of cultural norms and a shifting away from a male-centered language and towards a new form of poetics. Dickinson’s experimentation with form asserts female autonomy. Emily Dickinson confronts the patriarchal views of her society in her writing in ways that she couldn’t through her voice. She recognizes that her authority as a writer is greater than her authority will ever be as a woman, and so she uses that authority to make her ideas heard.
Dickinson in the 19th Century

Emily Dickinson was born into a period of the nineteenth century governed by a prevailing value system that later came to be known as “The Cult of True Womanhood,” or “The Cult of Domesticity.” Barbara Welter coined this term in 1966 in her article, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” where she outlines the attributes that a woman must possess as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). This set of rules was primarily promoted in New England and the Northeast, and according to Welter, maintained a significant cultural influence from 1820-1860. Submissiveness and domesticity were the most prominent of these characteristics, for while men were supposed to be pious and pure (but not as pious or pure as women), it was women’s role to be submissive to both God and the men and their lives, and to be responsible for all domestic tasks. These characteristics defined “true womanhood” during this time period, and to deviate from them meant that you were not only unfeminine, but also failing in your role as a wife and mother.

Overlapping with the values of the Cult of True Womanhood during this time period were the ideals of Republican Motherhood. Republican mothers upheld the values of the republic, and transmitted those values to the men in their lives. In her essay, “The Republican Mother and the Woman Citizen: Contradictions and Choices in Revolutionary America,” Linda Kerber suggests that the term Republican Motherhood extends beyond the role of mother: “The Republican Mother was also a Republican Wife. She chose a virtuous man for her husband; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from civic virtue; she educated her sons for it” (Kerber 151). These women bore the responsibility of preserving the virtue of their nation. Rather than a societal expectation that all men should be virtuous, there was an expectation that all women teach men to be virtuous.
Whether by conscious effort or not, Dickinson upheld most of the attributes expected of a true woman, especially within the realm of domesticity. She was an excellent cook, played the piano well, performed the daily household tasks expected of women, sewed, read, and wrote many letters. She left her father’s home only for a short period of her life, when she boarded at Mount Holyoke from 1847-1848. Her world became smaller and smaller as she aged, isolating herself further and further until the end of her life where she rarely left her bedroom. Some Dickinson scholars attribute her reluctance to leave home, especially in the later years of her life, to her failing eyesight. Other scholars submit that her reclusive behavior was due to a form of social anxiety, such as agoraphobia. Regardless of any afflictions that Dickinson may or may not have had, Dickinson’s remaining in the domestic sphere for the majority of her life should not be understood as bowing to societal pressures, but rather, as her own decision. Scholars often overlook the importance of choice in Dickinson’s isolation from the world; Dickinson maintains autonomy in her decision to remain at home because her autonomy stems from her work as a writer and, by staying home, she is able to write.

**Dickinson’s Audience and Her Reluctance to Publish**

When Dickinson scholars talk about Dickinson’s audience and the ideals that she depicts in her poetry, they often assume that her audience is male-centric and wary of female authority, as this was the audience of many female poets of her time, and, on a surface level, this appears to be the audience Dickinson is targeting. In her essay, “‘Red in my Mind’: Dickinson, Gender, and Audience,” Charlotte Nekola comes to this conclusion, suggesting that there is a level of hesitancy in Dickinson’s female speakers that illustrates a disinclination to convey examples of female authority in her work: “Perhaps it attempts to adjust an assertion of self for an audience
nervous of women’s authority or women’s subjectivity. This audience may well have included herself” (Nekola 38). This assumption about audience, however, ignores many of the nuances of Dickinson’s work and her experimentation with form.

Nekola recognizes the duality of Dickinson’s work, the way there often seem to be two currents of thought, especially in relation to the issue of female authority. However, she misinterprets this very purposeful duality – which Dickinson uses to simultaneously acknowledge and subvert the norms of her time – as a sign of Dickinson’s ambivalence about female authority in her poetry. Nekola suggests that this can be shown in Dickinson’s female speakers: “When Dickinson’s speakers venture a claim of authority or voice, they often diminish the size of their claim by trimming the speaker’s size down to something ‘small’” (Nekola 35). She attributes this weakening language that Dickinson uses in relation to the authority of women as evidence that Dickinson internalized the messages of the patriarchal society around her that told her that she could not be an autonomous woman poet. This perceived internalization, however, is part of the game Dickinson plays; she wants her audience to think she’s being controlled by the patriarchy and accepting this male-dominated language and ideology into her poetry, when really she is using it to subvert the patriarchal norms of her society.

When looking at experimentation with form, one must recognize the characteristics of the author’s writing that deviate from literary tradition. One of the qualities that sets Dickinson apart is the way her poetry resists finality. In order to truly appreciate Dickinson’s work, to comprehend her *ars poetica*, one must view each of her poems as an incomplete work. What looks like a draft, with alternate word endings and stanzas, is the closest that Dickinson wants to come to a complete work. Only in these unpublished forms is Dickinson able to express herself without limitations. By refusing to adhere to a certain standard of form – a finalized product –
she refuses to conform to the standards of society. Dickinson is more committed to telling the truth than to shaping her poetry in a more complete and traditional form that detracts from its original candor. As a means of avoiding the restrictions placed upon her as a female poet, she keeps her poetry to herself, and continues to write in a way that defies the conventions of her patriarchal society.

During her lifetime, Dickinson published only twelve times, each time anonymously. Even these publications, many scholars believe, were published against her will. In a letter to Higginson in 1866, she refers to her poem, “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” as her “Snake” when she says, “Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me–defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one–I had told you I did not print–I feared you might think me ostensible” (Johnson 192). She also included in this letter a clipping of this poem printed in the February 17th issue of the Springfield Weekly Republican. This avoidance of publication represents a fear of misprinting line breaks and punctuation, as she claims they did in this publication, but also of permanence and stagnancy. She felt uncomfortable with the idea of confining her poems to one final version in print, because to publish a version was, in essence, to freeze it in one state.

While Dickinson did not publish any collections of her poetry formally through an official publishing house, she did assemble collections of poetry informally through homemade manuscript books. One of her early editors, Mabel Loomis Todd, refers to these self-produced poetry collections as “fascicles.” Each fascicle consisted of 15 to 30 poems, transcribed onto stationary paper and bound with a red thread. There were many similar groupings of unbound stationary paper that one of her foremost editors, R. W. Franklin (whose edition of Dickinson’s poetry I use in this chapter), refers to as “sets”. In total, there are 40 known fascicles and 15
known sets. These fascicles and sets are the closest that Dickinson came to publishing a traditional poetry collection. As the producer of this ordering and editing of her poems, Dickinson maintained authority as a female poet.

As a woman, Dickinson was unable to maintain autonomy in most aspects of her life. To publish was, for her, to submit to a system of regularization – a patriarchal dominion that constricted her thoughts. She begins one of her poems with the lines, “Publication–is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man–,” implying that to publish means to sell one’s thoughts and what makes one unique. Her choice in diction here is no coincidence, as it was men’s minds that were most commonly represented through publication. By publishing, she feared that her convictions as a female poet would not be taken seriously, especially when those desires deviated from the norm. Her desire for her work to be fluid – an innovative concept that not many male poets at the time (never mind female ones) were experimenting with – would be lost, and so rather than give up her poetic voice, she chose to keep most of her work to herself. In this way, it could remain fluid, and she could maintain her autonomy as a female poet.

**Dickinson’s Experimentation with Meter and Capitalization**

In order to discuss Dickinson’s use of experimental form, it is important first to identify the characteristics that distinguish her poetry. One defining characteristic is her rejection of iambic pentameter. Dickinson uses various forms of hymn meter throughout her poetry, including common meter, short meter, long meter, and half meter. None of these forms of hymn meter contain iambic pentameter, which was one of the most commonly used forms of meter during Dickinson’s time. The subgroup of hymn meter that she most frequently utilizes is common meter, which is the meter for “Amazing Grace” and other popular church hymns.
Common meter is a four-line meter that alternates between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, as illustrated here in her poem, “How firm eternity must look”:

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

How mighty to the insecure—
Thy Physiognomy
To whom not any Face cohere—
Unless concealed in thee. (1-8)

Common meter such as this is typically used to add to the lyrical quality of a poem; Dickinson, however, disrupts this traditional lyrical structure of the poem through dashes and enjambment, breaking up the hymnal feet of the poem and forcing pauses in between natural feet in the meter. For instance, in “We learned the Whole of Love—,” Dickinson uses dashes to break up the otherwise unbroken use of short meter:

We learned the Whole of Love—
The Alphabet—the Words—
A Chapter—then the mighty Book—
Then—Revelation closed— (1-4)

In short meter, the first, second, and fourth lines are in iambic trimeter, and the third line is in iambic tetrameter. Her dashes break up this meter, however, as in the fourth line, where she breaks up the first foot using a dash, forcing the reader to pause and break the lyrical quality of
the stanza. Even when Dickinson uses traditional forms of meter, she makes sure that no poem is complete in its adherence to metrical form; there is always some instance of deviation from the rules.

It is difficult ascertain what the original meter was in many of Dickinson’s poems, as often, editors will ignore the line breaks that Dickinson uses in her manuscripts and presuppose forms of meter. For instance, in Dickinson’s “The way Hope builds his House,” Franklin transcribes the line breaks in the two stanzas as follows:

```plaintext
The way Hope builds his House

It is not with a sill—

Nor Rafter—has that Edifice

But only Pinnacle—

Abode in as supreme

This superficies

As if it were of Ledges smit

Or mortised with the Laws— (1-8)
```

The manuscript version of this poem, however, which is held in the Amherst Archives, is written on the back of an envelope, and the line breaks conform to the edges of the paper. The envelope’s flap is unfolded to create the peaked ‘house-like’ shape at the top of the poem.
Abode in as supreme
This superficies
As if it were of
Ledges smit
Or mortised with the
And
Laws— (1-14)
The poem is structured to fit within the house-like shape of the envelope, but in Franklin’s transcription, the lines fit almost perfectly within short meter. He disregards the way that Dickinson plays with form, using a traditional form of hymn meter but then arranging the lines to form a house and break up some of the hymnal structure of the poem. Some of the cleverness of Dickinson’s experimentation with form is lost when transcribed into a published collection of her poems.

Another unique characteristic of Dickinson’s poetry is the capitalization of words not typically capitalized. Some critics argue that Dickinson uses capitalization to emphasize certain words. Lois Cuddy suggests in her essay, “The Influences of Latin Poetics on Emily Dickinson’s Style,” that capitalization delineates stressed syllables in instances where Dickinson’s meter deviates from the traditional mold. When analyzing the meter of the poem “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple,” Cuddy claims that the seemingly random capitalization of nouns like “Gold” and “Purple” is meant to place emphasis on words that Dickinson wants stressed: “The metre which creates the Dickinson voice is again determined by stressing the first syllable of each capitalized word and all other relatively long syllables” (Cuddy 221). While it is true that most capitalized words begin with a stressed syllable, there are exceptions to that rule, and also instances where stressed words should be capitalized but are not. In that same poem, for instance, there are words that are stressed, that therefore by that argument should be capitalized, but are not:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
Then at the feet of the old Horizon
Laying her Spotted Face to die
Stooping as low at the Otter’s Window
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
Kissing her Bonnet to the Meadow
And the Juggler of Day is gone (1-8)

While words like “feet” and “old” in the third line, and “low” in line five are stressed, they are not capitalized, despite the fact that they do not conform to traditional hymnal meter. Some critics suggest that Dickinson’s use of capitalization is connected to her knowledge of German. In German, many non-proper nouns are capitalized. Dickinson therefore may have carried over this technique into her poetry in order to emphasize certain words in the poem. In “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple” the capitalized words are integral to creating an image. Her capitalization therefore, while seemingly random, serves to illuminate certain key words and phrases in her poetry.

Reinventing Rhyme Scheme and Purposefully Misspelling and Inventing Words

Dickinson breaks down conventional binaries through her experimentation with rhyme scheme. She is known for using slant rhymes to break up an otherwise perfect rhyme scheme, and also for inventing new rhyme schemes that build upon traditional forms. In the introduction to her book, Small outlines the basic types of rhyme that Dickinson uses in her poetry in the following table:

| Full Rhyme     | hands/sands |
Partial Rhyme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assonantal</th>
<th>green/dream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consonantal</td>
<td>wheel/mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-consonance</td>
<td>rides/is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero-consonance (or Vowel rhyme)</td>
<td>way/sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich consonance</td>
<td>deed/dead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unaccented

- stressed syllable + promoted syllable: be/eternity
- promoted syllable + promoted syllable: malignity/obliquity
- unstressed syllable + promoted syllable: honey/variety

Identical Rhyme (or Rime Riche)

- sea/see

Each of the examples she provides for these different types of rhyme schemes come from a Dickinson poem. Dickinson frequently employs both full rhyme and partial rhyme in her poetry, sometimes within the limits of one poem. There are also rhyme schemes that Small fails to mention that Dickinson experiments with in her poetry, such as broken rhyme, which is rhyme scheme that employs a rhyme using more than one word – “Runs his fingers thro’ it—/ Deity will see to it/ That You never do it—” (F654 Dickinson 6-8). Occasionally, rhyme is thrown out entirely, leaving just the skeleton of a poem in common meter without rhyme to provide it with the full-bodied lyrical quality traditionally associated with hymn meter.

Traditionally, full rhymes (blue/true) are seen as conveying a playful or happy tone, like a major key, while partial rhymes (thin/whim) are associated with solemn or sad emotions, like a minor key. Dickinson often takes these traditional schemas and dismantles them. She implies that a poem will be one thing by setting up expectations through rhyme scheme, and then deconstructs those expectations through themes that work in opposition to the tone established by the rhyme scheme. For instance, in F271 “Over the fence—,” the first stanza employs a predominantly traditional full rhyme scheme:

Over the fence—
Strawberries—grow—
Over the fence—
I could climb—if I tried, I know—
Berries are nice! (1-5)

Using full rhyme, Dickinson sets up a singsongy, almost childish tone to the poem. The last line, “Berries are nice!” breaks this rhyme scheme, and forces the reader to reevaluate the tone of the poem going into the second stanza:

But—if I stained my Apron—
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,—I guess if He were a Boy—
He’d—climb—if He could! (6-9)

In the second stanza the rhyme scheme switches to partial rhyme, which changes the tone of the poem. Instead of a simple nursery rhyme about strawberries growing over the fence, the poem now explores issues of socially constructed binaries and religious ideologies that prevent women, starting at a young age, from performing many of the simple tasks that men are able to do. The rhyme scheme in the first stanza establishes a happy, carefree tone, evoking images of childhood. That carefree childhood is then dismantled in the second stanza by the realization that gendered restrictions prevent the child from climbing the fence to pick the strawberries, and by the sexual implications of strawberries staining the speaker’s apron. As is true to Dickinson, the gender of the speaker is not identified at first using gendered poems; however, the apron signals the femininity of the speaker, and the speaker’s inability to climb the fence or stain the apron because it would be improper highlights certain gendered restrictions. This poem also serves as
an example of Dickinson playing with more than one rhyme scheme within one poem. In this case, the shift in rhyme scheme aids the shift in tone from the first stanza to the second.

Dickinson does not apply this reversal of traditional schema associated with rhyme to all her poetry; she merely shows that she is not bound by traditional rhyme schemes, and plays with them in order to subvert societal standards through an experimentation with form. Dickinson also uses rhyme to highlight relationships between certain words. Rhyme, in a way, is a framing device for diction. One pays more attention to a word when it is contrasted directly with another through rhyme. This also helps to set certain dichotomous words in contrast. Small examines this phenomenon as seen in Dickinson’s “She rose to His Requirement—dropt” (F857), where Dickinson uses rhyme to structure the subversive undercurrents of the poem. Small argues that there is a shift in the attitude of the poem, facilitated through rhyme scheme, that resides in: “the progression from the definite fact set forth at the opening – “She rose to His Requirement” – and from the conventional assurance that her action is “honorable” and right, to this quiet incertitude about the “unmentioned” depths of a wife’s experience” (Small 188). These “honorable” actions that Small refers to can be seen in the end-rhymes in the first stanza:

She rose to His Requirement—dropt

The Playthings of Her Life

To Take the honorable Work

Of Woman, and of Wife— (1-4)

The juxtaposition of “Life” and “Wife” in this first stanza emphasizes the societal standard that the two be interconnected. The fact that the two words are a perfect rhyme also helps to illustrate how easy it is to connect the two ideas, and how even the language that we use to describe these societal ideas is fraught with gendered ideologies.
In the second and third stanzas, there is a shift away from these easily gendered social constructs into a more complicated exploration of the difficulties of wifehood. As this discussion of the burden of being a wife deviates from the principles of the Cult of True Womanhood, it is more difficult to discuss, and therefore, the rhymes connecting certain words become more slanted, instead of the perfect rhyme in the first stanza:

If ought She missed in Her new Day,

Of Amplitude, or Awe—

Or first Prospective—or the Gold

In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned—as the Sea

Develope Pearl, and Weed,

But only to Himself—be known

The Fathoms they abide— (5-12)

The partial rhyme of “Awe” and “away” in the second stanza implies that the fulfillment that comes from being a wife is not as perfect as the idyllic juxtaposition of wife and life would suggest. In this “new Day” of being a wife, a woman stands to lose all her potential (“Prospective”) and all of her money (“Gold”) to a system in which a man gains while a woman gives.

This exposition of the potential that a woman stands to lose through the institution of marriage carries into the third stanza, where Dickinson again employs a partial rhyme by pairing “Weed” with “abide.” In this stanza, the sea is representative of masculine authority, or the patriarchal institution of marriage, and of this veil that covers a woman’s potential (which is
represented in the pearl and the weed that grows at the bottom of the sea). The sea keeps the pearl and the weed to himself, hiding them from even the woman, so that he is the only one who knows “The Fathoms they abide.” The rhyme scheme in this stanza is complicated, just as in the second, because the idea that marriage is a flawed and chauvinistic institution is less familiar than the belief that wifehood is the purpose of a woman’s life.

In the third stanza of “She rose to His Requirement—dropt,” the word “develop” appears to be misspelled as “Develope.” Early editors of Dickinson (such as Higginson, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, and Thomas Johnson) thought that this misspelling, and others like it, was accidental, and so they “fixed” the spelling in their editions. Franklin’s 1999 edition of “The Poems of Emily Dickinson,” however, reinstated words previously deemed misspellings. In his original introduction to the edition, Franklin states that he tried to stay true to Dickinson’s peculiar spellings and other grammatical eccentricities: “this edition follows her spelling and, within the capacity of standard type, her capitalization and punctuation” (Franklin 36). Franklin does not explain his reasoning for reinstating these grammatical incongruities, other than to say that he is reproducing the text in its original manuscript form, or the closest thing to it. Franklin does not include, however, variant words marked in the manuscripts, such as those discussed in relation to “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—.” While other editors assumed that these words were mistakes that Dickinson made, this assumption fits more with the narrative that Dickinson was a chaotic and uncontrolled writer than with the image of her being a careful and thoughtful writer whose work is constantly in a state of revision. Franklin is one of the first to shift into believing in the intentionality of Dickinson’s grammatical eccentricities, placing them back in his edition so that his readers may better understand her work through a reproduction that is closer to her original manuscripts.
When Dickinson feels that language is limiting her expression of thought, she often invents her own language to bypass these limitations. In F282 “We play at Paste—,” the English language lacked the word she wanted to describe the feeling of understanding what it is like to hold real gems in one’s hand after being a child playing with costume jewelry. Instead of describing this sensation, she places together the words “Gem” and “Tactics” in a new and unexpected juxtaposition, creating the phrase “Gem Tactics”:

We play at Paste—
Till qualified for Pearl—
Then, drop the Paste—
And deem Ourselves a fool—
The Shapes, tho’, were similar,
And our new Hands
Learned Gem Tactics
Practising Sands— (1-8)

Where other poets might have used metaphors or similes or another literary device to describe this feeling of becoming familiar with real gems, Dickinson invents her own phrase to describe it. The “Paste,” or fake costume jewelry that young girls during Dickinson’s time would play with, is replaced with “Pearl” in the following line, which young girls are only “qualified for” once they mature. In this instance, she is inventing not only a phrase, but a certain rite of passage when a girl transitions into a woman, giving up her childhood fake jewelry for new adult gems. Most vocabulary used to describe this transition is predominantly masculine. The term “bildungsroman” for instance, is usually used in reference to the coming of age story of a boy moving into his manhood. In her book, No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the
*Future of Women*, Estelle Freedman concurs that this tradition has long been male-dominated, but poses the question, “where were the female coming-of-age narratives?” (Freedman 313). Dickinson creates a feminine version of this coming-of-age storyline, using the image of young girls playing with jewels as a basis for this term “Gem Tactics.”

**De-gendering Pronouns and Deconstructing Gendered Paradigms**

Dickinson often works within the domestic sphere in her poetry to emphasize the constraints placed upon women due to gendered stereotypes. In their article, “Performances of gender in Dickinson’s poetry,” Suzanna Juhasz and Cristanne Miller discuss how Dickinson’s lack of gendered pronouns and other overt references to gender in her poetry expose the gendered constructs of her society:

Dickinson is rarely overt and frequently not literal about gender as inflecting the identity of her speaker. However, her poems are replete with conventional performative signs for indicating that gender is present: costumes, settings, and actions. Indeed, gender signs are always conventional; that is the point about the cultural construction of gender. It perpetually and ritually seeks a generic set of denominators, if only to cover the manifold possibility for variation that exists in people. (Juhasz and Miller 113)

By purposefully leaving out gendered pronouns or any other concrete references to gender, gender is depicted only through stereotyped “costumes, settings, and actions,” which shows the influence these stereotypes have on society’s perception of gender. Even when purposefully leaving out pronouns and names, the gender of the speaker or characters is still clearly discernable. This demonstrates that Dickinson is not merely absorbing these stereotypes and
using them insentiently in her work, as many authors during her time do, but instead she shows
the influence they hold in her society’s perceptions of people and the roles assigned to them by
gendered stereotypes.

Her poem, “I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—,” is one of the most widely referenced
examples of this technique. The speaker – whose gender is never explicitly mentioned using
pronouns or gendered terminologies – mentions numerous mundane household tasks commonly
associated with a woman’s duties, such as dressing herself appropriately and modestly, “I tie my
Hat—I crease my Shawl—/ Life’s little duties do—precisely—” (1-2), and refilling the flower
vase, “I put new Blossoms in the Glass—/ And throw the Old—away—” (5-6). The reader can
discern that the speaker is a woman based solely on these stereotyped gender roles.

The turn away from these trivial domestic tasks comes at the end of the second stanza,
where the phrase “And yet” signals that something unseen is interrupting these daily duties:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ put new Blossoms in the Glass—} \\
& \text{And throw the Old—away—} \\
I & \text{ push a petal from my Gown} \\
& \text{That anchored there—I weigh} \\
& \text{The time ‘twill be till six o’clock—} \\
& \text{So much I have to do—} \\
& \text{And yet—existence—some way back—} \\
& \text{Stopped—struck—my ticking—through— (5-12)}
\end{align*}
\]

The first reference to time suggests that the speaker is counting the time until dinner, and that
time is passing slowly for her despite all that she has to do. This sentiment is retracted in the final
line, however, when the speaker reveals that her internal clock has stopped, and that she is numb
to the passing of time and the triviality of the tasks she must complete, all due to an event “some way back” which is not explained. The “little duties” the speaker does so “precisely” are a charade to cover this numbness she feels inside.

In the third and fourth stanzas, the attention shifts away from the speaker’s need to continue acting within these gendered roles to a larger picture where both men and women feel trapped within these roles:

We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man
Or Woman—When the errand’s done
We came to Flesh—upon—
There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—
Of Action—sicker far—
To simulate—is stinging work—
To cover what we are

From Science—and from Surgery—
Too Telescopic eyes
To bear on us unshaded—
For their—sake—Not for Our’s— (13-24)

The last lines of the third stanza, “To simulate—is stinging work—/ To cover what we are” show that the gender roles prescribed to men and women confine them to a certain type of work that covers up their true identity. The “Our’s” at the end of the fourth stanza refers to the men and women confined to traditional gender roles, and the “their” is society. The capitalized scientific
terms in this stanza, however, (“Science,” “Surgery,” “Telescopic”) refer specifically to passions that women are kept from due to traditional gender roles. One of Dickinson’s favorite courses of instruction while at Mount Holyoke was Chemistry. In a letter written to her brother Austin on February 17, 1848, Dickinson interrupts her response to her brother’s letter with an aside about a lecture the headmaster Mary Lyon had given that day in Chemistry, “Your welcome letter found me all engrossed in the history of Sulphuric Acid!!!” (Johnson 22). Her excitement about scientific inquiry would have been limited, however, as a woman, to her studies in college. After graduating Mount Holyoke, students either moved back in with their parents and continued to help with the upkeep of the household, married and ran the household in their husband’s home, or became a teacher (while still fulfilling one of the two former roles outlined).

The absence of reference to gendered pronouns in the final stanza of “I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—,” shows that these constraints affect not only women but also men. The de-gendered “Our’s” in the statement that the “Science” and “Surgery” are “For their—sake—Not for Our’s—” suggests that the constraints of gender roles limit not only women but also men, as their identities and passions are limited to a single gendered sphere. She allows the door to swing both ways – either women could be kept from science, or men could be forced to enter the field of science. The ambiguity of this statement adds a new dimension to her discussion of gendered constraints, submitting that they adversely affect society as a whole, and not just women.

In a similar vein, Anna Shannon Elfenbein suggests in her essay, “Unsexing Language: Pronominal Protest in Emily Dickinson’s ‘Lay this Laurel’,” that Dickinson’s de-gendering of pronouns allows the reader to see the sexual biases present in traditional systems of linguistics. Elfenbein argues that it is only through a modern feminist critique that we are able to better understand Dickinson’s unconventional form: “this protest emerges in the poem’s use of
language, language that Dickinson’s earliest readers saw as insanely idiosyncratic and unconventional and that we are only now beginning to see as political and even radical” (Elfenbein 214). Elfenbein goes on to suggest that because of the absence of modern feminist critique during Dickinson’s time period, her contemporary readers were unable to comprehend the radicalism of her work: “Ironically, it was perhaps the inability of those she addressed to comprehend her ‘slanting’ mode of expression that made it possible for her to trifle with the language and get away with it” (Elfenbein 214). The subversive form of her poetry allowed her to get away with the radical ideas she was weaving into her work, because, on the occasions that it was either published during her lifetime, read by contemporary colleagues, or published immediately after her death, people were unable to sift through the layers of her writing to find the radical ideas hidden under the surface. The “slanting” that Elfenbein refers to in her essay comes from Dickinson’s line, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—,” which aptly surmises one of Dickinson’s favorite techniques as a poet – to tell the truth, but to hide it beneath layers of idiosyncratic form.

Establishing Female Authority and Restructuring Patriarchal Hierarchies

Many of Dickinson’s early literary critics, and even some of the more contemporary ones, believe that she often silences or depreciates her female speakers by shying away from the use of an authoritative, confident voice, showing a reliance on male authority. Dickinson, however, does not imagine that women should be silent. These poems are her way of being loud. The ambivalent voice found in most of her poetry is not a female speaker unsure of her authority as a speaker, but rather an expression of the ways female voices are often stifled by a male-dominated world. In “A Tongue—to tell Him I am true!” (F673), Dickinson plays with this
concept of women’s voices being silenced and not appreciated for their worth by restructuring patriarchal hierarchies. When Charlotte Nekola analyzes “A Tongue—to tell Him I am true!,” however, she claims that Dickinson diminishes the role of her female speaker by creating a female speaker’s voice that is reliant upon male authority: “But she cannot speak for herself. To get the tongue she needs the gold fee; to put the message across she needs to pay the messenger boy and the lad. It seems that the voice cannot be claimed, then, without cost to the speaker, or perhaps without a male metaphor or medium as conveyor” (Nekola 37). In this reading, she overlooks the poem’s insistence on the value of that female voice. The fifth stanza of the poem, which Nekola refers to in the above quote, conveys the message of this female narrator in relation to precious stones:

Thy Pay—in Diamonds—be—

And His—in solid Gold—

Say Rubies—if He hesitate—

My Message—must be told— (18-21)

Nekola focuses on the importance of the message over the importance of the voice delivering that message. It is not what the message contains, but rather the bearer of that message, that is important. Dickinson describes the worth of the message in relation to gems, beginning with diamonds, then moving to gold, and then moving to rubies. It is significant that she places each of these precious stones on separate lines, as this signifies a building up of their worth. In the last line of that stanza, the noun is not a precious stone, but rather, “My Message.” Dickinson places the value of the woman’s word above all these precious stones. Thus, while Dickinson acknowledges that there is a system in place in which the thoughts of women are often conveyed
through the voices of men, she shows that this woman’s voice is priceless, despite the lack of
importance that society places on it.  

Dickinson employs this technique frequently in her poetry, where she utilizes line breaks
and enjambment to classify hierarchies of power and worth, especially in relation to issues of
writing, gender, and voice. In her poem “I reckon—When I count at all—,” the first stanza
outlines a list, seemingly denoting some sort of hierarchy that the speaker believes to be true:

I reckon—When I count at all—
First—Poets—Then the Sun—
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—
And then—the List is done— (1-4)

In this poem, as in “A Tongue—to tell Him I am true!” the line breaks serve to establish a certain
hierarchy of nouns: poets, the sun, summer, and heaven. In the following stanza, however, that
list is reversed when “Poets” arrives in the last stanza:

But, looking back—the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole—
The Others look a needless Show—
So I write—Poets—All— (5-8)

The other nouns in this hierarchy have been eliminated all together, as the speaker suggests that
poetry encompasses all “The Others,” and so they are insignificant in comparison to the work of
a poet, which seeks to “Comprehend the Whole” and explain the meaning behind these other

1 While one cannot definitely know that this speaker is a woman, as Dickinson often avoids the use of
gendered pronouns in reference to her speakers (or sometimes altogether) in her poems, it is implied that she is a
woman because the speaker must convey their message through the vessel of a boy. In Nekola’s interpretation, this
diminishes the value of the speaker’s message that it must be transmitted through another. But as Dickinson shows,
this message is worth much more than anything this boy has to say.
entities. The speaker places a value on poetry as a means of expression because it can place all of these other entities within its sphere. In the same way Dickinson creates a hierarchy – using line breaks – of the value of the precious stones in “A Tongue—to tell Him I am true!” she also creates a hierarchy using line breaks in “I reckon—When I count at all—.” In this case, however, it is the noun “poet” that usurps all others in the previous lines by building up to it, rather than the concept of a female voice. Both examples, however, show the value that Dickinson places upon the voices of female poets. For her, the domain of the poem is one in which women can break free of the restrictions their society places upon them, and share their voices so that they may be heard.

Dickinson’s Editorial Process as Illustrated through “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—”

In many instances, Emily Dickinson’s experimentation with form in her poetry parallels an experimentation with the shortcomings of writing as a form of communicating human thought. This is especially evident in instances where one can follow the process of how she revised her work. Through her communications with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, there survive multiple copies of Dickinson’s edits of her poem “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” as well as the conversations she had with Sue about them throughout the process. The remaining components of Dickinson’s revision process of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” illustrate her main objective in writing poetry, which is to transcend the barrier between human thought and written expression while still maintaining the integrity of the original idea.

Dickinson’s refusal to choose a version of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—,” coupled with her constant revision of her poetry, shows her insistence on finding a middle ground
between expressing her thoughts and connecting with the outside world. Dickinson is concerned with her voice being heard, and preventing a male-dominated society from speaking for her. This can be seen particularly in the second stanza of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—,” where she wavers between two versions that are strikingly different.

The first version she sends to Sue contains the same stanzas that were published in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* in June of 1861. The two stanzas were written as follows:

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Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,
Untouched by morning
And untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of satin
And Roof of stone.
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Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them—
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence—
Ah, what sagacity perished here! (1-11)
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Sue was apparently opposed to the second stanza in this version, however, because Dickinson sent her a revised second stanza later that summer, along with the note, “Perhaps this verse would please you better—Sue—” (Johnson 162):

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Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—
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In this revised version of the second stanza, the images are grandiose and worldly. The lines “Worlds scoop their Arcs—/And Firmaments—row—” elicit an image of cosmic control and power. The subsequent line “Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—” provides a smaller scale image of power, this one in human form, with the depiction of royalty and lords and other human forms of power. In Sue’s reply, she likens the revised second stanza to “chain lightning that blinds us hot night in the Southern sky” (Johnson 162) as an explanation for why she believes it does not fit well with the first stanza. This aptly describes the intangibility and fleetingness of the images in this stanza, especially in case of the image, “Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—” in the last line. It is difficult to even describe the last line as an image, as those particular set of words placed next to each other call to mind no physical sensations, but rather an abstract concept that makes sense only within the confines of one’s mind. For Dickinson, the best way to interact with her audience and convey her thoughts to the world is to put them down on paper in a form that mimics how she perceives them in her mind. Because of this, some of her lines (such as “Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—”) lack a tangible structure; producing a visual image of many of her lines of poetry proves difficult, for in many cases, there is no clear image being produced.

The altered version of the second stanza that Dickinson sends to Sue after her criticism of the first version represents an attempt to downsize the sphere in which she is working to create a more perceptible image that can be connected to the first stanza so that the reader may better understand her ideas. Sue suggests that the previous second stanza did not “go with the ghostly
shimmer of the first verse” (Johnson 162), and so Dickinson restores the ethereal tone of the first stanza in a newly revised second stanza, attached with the question, “Is this frostier?”:

Springs—shake the sills—
But—the Echoes—stiffen—
Hoar—is the Window—
And numb—the Door—
Tribes of Eclipse—in Tents of Marble—
Staples of Ages—have buckled—there— (7-12)

This version is indeed “frostier,” as the chambers within which the dead dwell are frosted over and closed shut: “Hoar—is the Window—and numb—the door—.” Dickinson revamps the ghostly quality of the first stanza, and creates a scene in which the dead are no longer safe in their alabaster chambers, but rather they are eclipsed in “Tents of Marble—.” The image of the tents suggests that the dead anticipated this to be a temporary place of rest, but the depiction of frost covering the windows and numbing the door denotes a sense of finality. In this version of the second stanza, Dickinson creates a more direct connection to the first stanza, lessening the disparity of tone between the two stanzas as seen in previous versions.

The juxtaposition of these multiple differing versions of the second stanza of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” illustrates the internal conflict within Dickinson between what resonates with her and what resonates with others. She constantly reevaluates her work because she believes that it falls short at a level of connection with the world outside of her mind. Dickinson’s preservation of her poems in her fascicles serves as a representation of the many trials and errors she has undergone in her endeavor to produce a poem that can transcend the barriers of true human connection. “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” is one of the few poems
that Dickinson published. Her hesitancy to commit to a final version even after submitting the work for publication – as shown through her editorial process here with Sue – reflects a refusal to commit her work to one finalized form.

As illustrated through her correspondence with Sue over “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—,” Dickinson’s audience during her lifetime consisted primarily of a select few persons to whom she entrusted her work. Because of this, her poetry lies within the boundaries of both the public and the private sphere. While Dickinson rarely chose to share her work with others, she wrote with a larger audience in mind. This can be seen in the way she manipulates form to subvert the norms of her society on an implicit level while expressing the ideals of that society on the surface. If she were writing only within the confines of a private sphere, then she would not experiment with form in a way that pushes back against the constraints her society places on women in general, and also on female authors. If her audience as a poet was solely herself, and some of her closest relations, then her writing would not need to present itself as conforming to society on the exterior, while defying societal norms through formal construction. Therefore her poetry, her experimentation with form, represents a desire to reach an audience larger than her bedroom walls.

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When exploring Dickinson’s experimentation with form, one resounding refrain is the element of truth, and finding one’s own truth separate from any societal truths by gaining autonomy through writing. As a woman, Dickinson feels that the only way to explore the truth is through her poetry, because that is the only place where she can invent her own literary language. Dickinson uses form to break out of societal conventions that constrain her. By
inventing new means of expression and creating a new system of linguistics, Dickinson crafts her own unique voice and medium of conveying the female voice.

The multilayered structure of Dickinson’s poetry is protective in that the radical nature of her subversion of patriarchal norms is hidden beneath a carefully constructed veil. Marianne Moore’s poem “The Paper Nautilus” exemplifies this type of protective form that Dickinson uses. In the poem, a nautilus, a small sea snail, builds a transparent shell behind which she secretly protects and hatches her eggs before letting them out into the world:

Not for these
the paper nautilus
constructs her thin glass shell.

Giving her perishable
souvenir of hope, a dull
white outside and smooth-edged inner surface
glossy as the sea, the watchful
maker of it guards it
day and night; she scarcely
eats until the eggs are hatched. (Moore 5-15)

Dickinson’s experimental style is like that of the paper nautilus. She constructs a “thin glass shell” on the outside, which seemingly meets the gendered standards of her society and extols the virtues that all women should hold. But beneath that glass shell, one can see another world
depicted, one in which gendered roles are deconstructed and a new systems of linguistics is created. Through her writing, Dickinson creates her own world – one in which she is autonomous, and is able to speak freely, telling the truth without fear of condemnation.
Chapter 2
“Beginning again and again”: Gertrude Stein’s Disassembly and Reconstruction of Language

“The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything”
– Gertrude Stein, in “Composition as Explanation, pg. 523

Gertrude Stein was born in 1874, only twelve years before Dickinson’s death in 1886. They never met during their lifetimes, but the overlap in time periods meant that women were held to relatively the same societal standards in both Stein and Dickinson’s lifetime. The gendered norms that they combat in their respective works, therefore, are very similar; one of the major differences, however, in their battle against repressive American society, is that Stein explores issues of both gender and sexuality explicitly in her work. The second major difference is that where Dickinson is concerned with pointing out how patriarchal poetry is, Stein is concerned with pointing out how male-controlled, and additionally, heteronormative, language in general is.² This is not to say that Stein is not concerned with theories of literature; she is, like Dickinson, interested in exposing and deconstructing the patriarchal threads woven throughout literary tradition. She uses literature, however, as an example of a medium of communication that is driven by patriarchal, heterosexual norms. She also discusses language at large, and how society’s primary method of communication, both written and oral, is intrinsically tainted with male-centered, heteronormative standards.

In this chapter, I argue that through her experimentation with form, Stein constructs a new language that defies male-controlled and heteronormative models and illuminates for readers the patriarchal core of their current language system. In her book, Gertrude Stein and the

² While Dickinson was most definitely non-heterocentric (and as many scholars have suggested, may have even been lesbian herself), her poetry is less explicitly focused on breaking down societal norms about sexuality and more focused on subverting gendered cultural norms.
Essence of What Happens, Dana Cairns Watson writes, “For Gertrude Stein, language is a living but ailing organ of our social body” (Watson 1). This line eloquently describes Stein’s relation to language. She believes that language is a reflection of society, and that it represents in many ways the nature of humanity and of society, but that it fails in many ways to accurately depict the full scope of human experience. Watson goes on to say that Stein’s poetry calls for “a revision and rearrangement of fundamental orders: the syntax of English sentences, the contained and supposedly individualized selfhood of Americans, interpersonal allegiances, and social and political organization” (Watson 1). While the jump from “the syntax of English sentences” to “social and political organization” may seem drastic, Stein believes that, through language, one can both study and remedy social and political issues that have become embedded within the traditional rhetoric used by one’s society. The social and political issues that Stein is especially interested in are those concerning the marginalization of minority groups, and, even more expressly, instances of sexism and heterosexism.

Many critics, in discussing Stein’s experimentation with language, argue that Stein strips meaning from words in order to irradiate the cultural norms that have been layered over preexisting language. Galvin asserts that Stein removes words from their original setting in order to show her readers the patriarchal patterns deep-rooted in their language system:

*By taking words from their expected context and placing them outside the confines of typical grammatical structure, Stein is creating a linguistic space where words can be more flexible. Taken out of the clearly defined roles of a patriarchal discourse, they begin to resonate with their own potential, as the reader is thwarted in her attempt to determine the author’s intent.* (Galvin 44)
Where Galvin, and other critics like her, diverge from my argument in this chapter, however, is when they attribute this attempt to disassociate words from patriarchal conversation as separate from a reinstatement of nontraditional meaning. Galvin proceeds, in this argument, to suggest that Stein strips all meaning from words, and that she is “not interested in conveying any definitive ‘meaning’ through her text” as her writing circumvents, “the patriarchal concept of the author’s ‘intent’” (Galvin 44). In this chapter, however, I will argue that Stein does, in fact, reattach meaning to words, but in a way that shows the arbitrariness, sexism, and heterosexism behind traditional systems of meaning attached to language. To suggest that there is no meaning attached to Stein’s poetry is to imply that it is merely an experimentation with language, and not with the societal implications attached to that language. Stein aims not only to deconstruct language, but also to reconstruct it in ways that defy patriarchal and heteronormative social constructs and present alternatives to these traditional patterns of expression through language.

Where Dickinson is interested in the art of poetry, and chooses poetry as her medium for condemning and subverting patriarchal norms, Stein is interested in the art of language, and uses literature – specifically, prose poems – as a medium to discuss issues of language. Stein is not usually exclusively referred to as a poet; her work, as I will discuss in this chapter, bridges many genres, sometimes even within the same piece. In my thesis, I place Stein within the literary canon of American female experimental poets because her work blends the lines of literature, encompassing elements of both poetry and prose simultaneously in works that read like prose poems. Stein rejects the idea of assimilating into binaries or any other conventional groupings; in fact, she would most likely rebuff the idea of being placed into a literary canon as I am doing now. Her rejection of traditional literary categorization and genre, however, does not mean that she is not concerned with her audience; Stein wants her readers to learn to disentangle
themselves from the masculinity and heteronormativity of language, and to embrace the idea of a new language that speaks not just for the dominant group, but for all of society.

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Just as Dickinson’s poetry is largely influenced by her experience living in Amherst, her time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and her relationship with Sue Gilbert Dickinson, Stein’s writing is also influenced by her experience in medical school, her time in Paris collecting art, and her relationship with Alice B. Toklas. Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania to an upper-class Jewish family. Her family moved to Vienna and then Paris before settling in Oakland, California, where Stein spent most of her childhood. She attended Radcliffe College from 1893 to 1897, where she studied psychology. She then enrolled in medical school at Johns Hopkins, where she dropped out after two years without a degree. The atmosphere of John Hopkins at the time was drastically different from the all-female Radcliffe: “Radcliffe’s supportive atmosphere was worlds away from the keen competition at Hopkins, where many male medical students disliked having women in the program. Of the sixty-three students in the class of 1901, eleven were female” (Wagner-Martin 44). Stein was specifically interested in women’s medicine, as both her mother and sister-in-law had suffered from obstetrical issues. One of her main motivations in enrolling in medical school for as long as she did was because of the inequalities in the treatment of women in the medical field. This interest in women’s medicine and female anatomy can be seen in depictions of the female body and feminine ailments throughout Stein’s writing.

Although Stein is largely considered an American writer, she did spend a good portion of her life in Paris with her brother, Leo. In 1902, Leo moved to London, and Stein soon followed. The following year, they moved to Paris, and there they collected art in the famous 27 rue de
Fleurs: “With her brother she began to purchase modern paintings (Picasso, Matisse, Cézanne, Braque) and to encourage the careers of several artists” (Hoffman 6). As I will discuss later in this chapter, the art that she collected while in Paris – especially the art of Picasso and Matisse – greatly influenced her experimentation with form, imparting her with the inspiration to deconstruct language on the page in the same way that Picasso and Matisse deconstructed figures on the canvas.

This gallery space at 27 rue de Fleurus later became the home for Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas. One of the most influential relationships in Stein’s life for her writing is her intimate relationship with Alice B. Toklas. The importance of their relationship was often overlooked in early criticism of Stein, due to the taboo nature of homosexual relationships at the time. Alice is most famously referenced in Stein’s work “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” but she is also present, less overtly, in Stein’s other work. Critics have suggested that references to a woman named “Ada” throughout Stein’s work are a pseudonym for Alice. As I argue below, Stein’s manipulation of “cookbook” language is an homage to Alice, who cooked for Stein frequently, and even published her own cookbooks.

In both her experiences at medical school and her relationship with Alice, Stein is an outsider due to her sexuality and gender. Gertrude Stein’s narrative is one of restriction and repression due to her identity as both female and lesbian. Through her writing, Stein is able to convert these instances of restraint into depictions of freedom through her experimentation with form, exploring alternative avenues for expression both for her and for others marginalized by their gender and sexuality.
Repitition and Juxtaposition as an Approach to Reinventing Meaning

When critics discuss Stein’s formation of a new language that defies cultural norms, they often describe it using terms that suggest the demise of one language and the birth of an entirely new one. The new language that she constructs, however, is one in which she reassembles the key components of language in a way that is unrecognizable, and then uses these patriarchal terms to integrate non-traditional ideas into her work. In her article, “Poetry As Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein,” Marjorie Perloff explains that one of the ways that Stein reinvents the meaning that certain words convey is by placing these words in new contexts: “But words, as even Gertrude Stein recognized, have meanings, and the only way to MAKE IT NEW is not to pretend that meaning doesn’t exist but to take words out of their usual contexts and create new relationships among them” (Perloff 34). Stein does not reinvent language by making up new words (as J.R.R. Tolkien, someone else who is fascinated with the reinvention of language, does) but instead by stripping words of their original meaning and then painting them over in a new one.

Stein’s perception of language asserts that language is clothed in traditional and socially constructed meaning that can be removed to reveal its original construction. Stein, in her experimentation with form, removes that clothing, leaving the words bare. In this way, she is able to both highlight the ways in which language has become socially constructed and also reconstruct it so that it can be used to describe ways of life that are not considered traditional. In her article, “The Queer Temporality of Gertrude Stein’s Continuous Present,” Daniela Miranda suggests that Stein chooses to exhibit “desire to innovate and to break with tradition” not by “exploiting or inventing ‘new’ poetic forms but by attempting to re-envision repetition, ordinariness, and habit as ways to disrupt hegemonic temporalities and problematize
essentialized identity categories” (Miranda 1). Stein believes that language is full of life, but that society covers up the realities of this life with shrouds of tradition. By removing those shrouds, she is able to bring vitality and truthfulness back into language. Perloff presents a similar analogy to this one, by suggesting that one of the best ways to analyze Stein’s experimentation with form and creation of a new language is “to compare it to an X-ray. Words are related so as to show what is there beneath the skin, what is behind the social and artistic surface” (Perloff 42). Perloff suggests that Stein uses the juxtaposition of certain words to reinvent meaning; however, in this section, I will discuss how Stein reinvents meaning using not only the juxtaposition, but also the repetition of conventional words.

Some of Stein’s most well known phrases come out of this technique of using repetition to strip meaning from words, including “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” “Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded,” and “To write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write.” In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein explains that she believes there is a separation between the ideas of repetition and insistence, namely that what others refer to as repetition, she believes is in fact insistence: “Then also there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition” (Stein 288). She does not believe that repetition exists, as she believes the same act can never truly be repeated, whether that be a word or phrase or action. She explains this using the analogy of a frog hopping: “it is very like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop. … That is the human expression saying the same thing and in insisting and we all insist varying the emphasizing” (Stein 288). Therefore, when Stein repeats a word or a phrase, she believes that the meaning of that word or phrase shifts as a direct result of its repetitive use.
One of the principal examples of Stein using repetition to reinvent the meaning of a word is in her work “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene.” Her use of the word “gay” in this text has long been considered the first time that the word is used to mean homosexual instead of happy. The meaning of the word shifts then throughout the work not because there is a different implication attached to it each time, but because the reader’s interpretation of the meaning of the word shifts throughout the course of the work. Returning to Perloff’s claim that Stein uses the juxtaposition of words to convey a new meaning, the juxtaposition of Miss Furr’s gayness with Miss Skeene’s gayness allows the reader to understand the importance of their connection in being gay. They are often juxtaposed through terms such as “together” and “they” to emphasize the connection of the word to their cohabitation and lifestyle together: “Helen Furr and Georgine Skeene lived together then. … They were together then and travelled to another place and stayed there and were gay there. … They were both gay there, they were regularly working there both of them cultivating their voices there, they were both gay there” (Stein 17). After establishing that together they are gay, Stein shows that the two women are gay separately from one another, enforcing the idea that their sexual preferences towards women are not exclusive to this one relationship: “Georgine Skeene went away to stay two months with her brother. … Helen Furr stayed there where they had been regularly living the two of them and she would then certainly not be lonesome, she would go on being gay. She did go on being gay” (Stein 20-21). The repetition of the word gay both in reference to the women together and apart enforces the idea that it is linked to their identity, and therefore the word shifts from an adjective to a noun as it no longer describes an emotional state but a lifestyle and sexual identity.

The emphasis of the fact that together Miss Furr and Miss Skeene were gay and not just singularly shows that their happiness is dependent on one another, and in this way, Stein does not
completely remove the original meaning of the word, as the element of happiness still remains in her redefinition. Since prior to this piece, “gay” never had any meaning other than happiness, Stein’s contemporary readers would at first imagine that because together Miss Furr and Miss Skeene were gay, together they were happy. This is not far off from the meaning that Stein is shifting the word towards, as together they are gay and in love, and therefore, happiness is derived from their state of being gay. In a way, Stein’s redefinition of the word “gay” could apply not only to homosexual couples, but to any couples who are loving truthfully, and are not bound by convention but rather by this feeling of happiness inspired by the happiness of another. Stein promotes a language that encompasses all aspects of reality, and not just those that pertain to the dominant groups in society – heterosexual, white men. Stein does not address the issue of racial discrimination in language in her poetry as explicitly as she does issues of gender and sexuality; however, as I will discuss later, Stein opens the door for other poets to redefine a language for other minorities that are excluded from the prevailing linguistic system.

Stein’s poem “Sacred Emily” serves as another example of repetition being used to strip patriarchal associations from words and place them within a new context. The poem opens with the lines “Compose compose beds./ Wives of great men rest tranquil” (Stein 178). In her article, “Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein,” Natalia Cecire suggests, “This opening reveals that ‘Sacred Emily’ is a poem of oikonomia, one interested in particular in the household management undertaken by the ‘wives of great men.’ It is, in other words, about a particular kind of work, the repetitive work in the home that is often construed as non-work” (Cecire 286-7). Words and phrases that bear associations with the management of households are repeated throughout “Sacred Emily,” illustrating both the repetitiveness of these actions, and the ways in which these actions are undervalued. Many of these repetitions, such as one in the first line
instructing the wife to make the bed, are imperatives, directing the wife to conduct her household chores in a certain manner. The lines “Neatness./ Neatness Neatness./ Excellent cording./ Excellent cording short close” (Stein 183) and “Furnish seats./ Furnish seat nicely./ Please repeat./ Please repeat for./ Please repeat” (Stein 186) use the repetition of direct commands to illustrate the expectations placed upon women in terms of the quality of the housework, and also the mundaneness of these simple tasks that are repeated day in and day out. Some of these domestic repetitions contain external references to other works of experimental literature, such as the play on words in the lines “So great so great Emily./ Sew grate sew grate Emily./ Not a spell nicely” (Stein 182). In these lines, Stein alludes to Emily Dickinson, who sewed very well, and often made reference to sewing in her poetry. Dickinson’s fascicles, in fact, were bound together using a red thread that she stitched through the paper to create a binding. Stein also alludes to Dickinson’s frequent misspelling of words (“Not a spell nicely”), recognizing how Dickinson’s own experimentation with form in her purposeful misspelling and misuse of words has influenced Stein’s experimentation here with repetition being used to deconstruct gendered paradigms and expose the ways in which women are undervalued and oppressed.

The most notorious line in this poem, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” (Stein 187) uses repetition to strip meaning from the word, and instead places the focus on the identity of that object separate from any social or cultural implications associated with the word. Although the English language does not have masculine or feminine words as many other languages do, the word rose is inherently feminine, as flowers have long been associated with beauty and womanhood. Stein emphasizes this connotation by following this line with “Loveliness extreme” (Stein 187), implying that a rose serves as an extreme version of what it means to be lovely, or
feminine. By repeating, “a rose is a rose is a rose,” Stein suggests that this rose exists separately from any gendered connotations, and that it has had social stigmas placed upon it.

In “Patriarchal Poetry,” Stein maneuvers through different modes of traditional literature, all of which she argues, encompass patriarchal ideals. The repetitive rhythm of the poem is like a meditation, in this case, a meditation on the ways in which patriarchal culture has become interwoven in all facets of literature. Stein mimics the form of patriotic chants through the repetition of militaristic commands: “Patriarchal Poetry left./ Patriarchal Poetry left left./ Patriarchal poetry left left right left” (Stein 606). She also imitates the repetitive rhythm of nursery rhymes, using nonsense words to mimic the structure of a nursery rhyme like Mother Goose: “Dinky pinky dinky pinky dinky pinky dinky pinky once and try. Dinky pinky dinky pinky dinky pinky dinky pinky lullaby” (Stein 606). This portrayal of nursery rhyme language suggests that patriarchal ideals are embedded even in these nascent forms of language. Stein portrays more complicated literary forms as well, inserting traditional sonnet verse (under the title “A Sonnet.”) in between these repetitive phrases, “To the wife of my bosom./ All the happiness from everything/ And her husband./ May he be good and considerate” (Stein 585). The repetition of the phrase “Patriarchal Poetry” serves as a thread weaving these different representations of literary genres together, insisting that they are all connected through their patriarchal roots.

Stein and “Cookbook” Language as a Means of Asserting Female Authority and Subverting Heternormative Structures

Just as Dickinson references the domestic sphere in her poetry in order to expose chauvinist ideologies, Stein uses traditional domestic texts to employ counter-normative ideas and establish impressions of female authority. In her article, "Familiar Strangers": The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons," Margueritte S. Murphy maintains that
the short, truncated sentences that Stein employs throughout *Tender Buttons* create a tone of
authority by mimicking the style of home magazines and cookbooks popular for women at the
time. Unlike Dickinson, who frequently asserts ideals of female authority using the first person,
Stein shies away from the first person and instead uses the impersonal style of what Murphy
refers to as “cookbook” language. This impersonal and direct rhetoric is especially apparent
under the section “Food,” where many phrases resemble a collage of language from cookbooks
and home magazines:

> Seat a knife near a cage and very near a decision and more nearly a timely
> working cat and scissors. Do this temporarily and make no more mistake in
> standing. Spread it all and arrange the white place, does this show in the house,
> does it not show in the green that is not necessary for that color, does it not even
> show in the explanation and singularly not at all stationary. (Stein 18-19)

These chaotic directives and shortened phrases replicate the style of cookbooks which assume
that women already have a certain amount of knowledge about domestic tasks and omit certain
steps and phrases, suggesting that this shorthand of cookbooks and magazines is a language of its
own to which only women are party. These direct commands such as “Seat a knife,” “Do this
temporarily,” and “Spread it all” are juxtaposed with an indecisive rhetoric as the speaker
questions how to arrange certain colors in the home (“does this show in the house” “does it not
show in the green”), showing the weight of society’s judgment on a woman’s decisions within
the domestic sphere.

Murphy argues that the authority of Stein’s female voice imitates “the form of domestic
guides to living: cookbooks, housekeeping guides, books of etiquette, guides to entertaining,
maxims of interior design, fashion advice” (Murphy 388), which allows her to portray “her own
idiosyncratic domestic arrangement by using and displacing the authoritative discourse of the conventional woman’s world” (Murphy 389). Stein takes a familiar vocabulary and style of rhetoric typically written by women and for women to both highlight the value of women’s power within the domestic sphere but also to denigrate the gendering of the domestic sphere. She simultaneously “us[es] and diplac[es] the authoritative discourse of the conventional woman’s world” (Murphy 389) by both using this “cookbook” style as a source of female authority and also recognizes the ways in which this style of rhetoric surrounding the domestic sphere limits women.

This technique of assimilating to the rhetoric of the domestic sphere through parataxis is similar to Dickinson’s de-gendering of pronouns and deconstructing of gendered paradigms in poems like “I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—,” where Dickinson both illustrates the power that women have within the domestic sphere but also discusses the limitations of the gendering of spheres for both men and women. While Stein’s manner of experimentation with form is entirely different, it accomplishes the same goal of placing value upon the institution of domestic work that is so often overlooked. Many critics suggest that Stein’s depiction of these household objects in Tender Buttons functions to tear down the institution of domestic work. What Murphy argues, however, is that she believes “Stein’s texts work, rather, to reinvest domestic labor with value, to make household tasks into code words for her stability in her new domestic arrangement and for erotic lesbian love” (Murphy 388). This idea of working in code and weaving concealed messages into her work through her experimental form is something that Stein learned, more likely than not, from the sovereign of subversion, Emily Dickinson. Dickinson was primarily concerned with breaking down a language constructed upon gendered
paradigms; Stein goes a step beyond that and begins to construct a language that defies the heteronormativity of her society’s system of linguistics.

Like most forms of commercialized domestic products, cookbooks and other domestic publications have been constructed upon the heteronormative, gendered stereotype that a wife (and other women in the family) cooks for her husband (and other men in the family). As Katharina Vester discusses in her book *A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities*, however, many writers have begun to deconstruct the heteronormativity of cooking and cookbooks: “But for the last hundred years, texts have also undermined and subverted the heteronormativity of cookbooks and have used the well-established connection between food and sex to reinscribe marginalized forms of love and desire into the practice of cooking” (Vester 138). The first writer that Vester cites as propelling this change is Gertrude Stein. Cooking was an important part of Stein’s relationship with Toklas, as Toklas would often cook for Stein, and even published two cookbooks, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* in 1954 and *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present* in 1958. In this way, the homage to the domestic that Stein presents in *Tender Buttons* serves as just as much of a testament to her life with Toklas as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Using cookbook language, Stein is able to “challenge the scientific and medical discourses that depicted same-sex relations as degenerate, while simultaneously subverting the heteronormative authority of the household manual” (Vester 139). By subverting the heteronormativity that has dominated the domestic sphere, Stein is able to reclaim it using language that counters traditional heteronormative rhetoric.

Just as Dickinson uses traditional rhetoric to introduce nontraditional ideas, Stein uses heteronormative rhetoric to introduce a language of “homonormativity.” Throughout the “Food” section of *Tender Buttons*, Stein repeats the words “MILK” and “EGGS,” culminating in a
segment titled “CUSTARD” (a combination of milk and eggs). Stein uses these traditional terms as symbols of the female body: milk symbolizing a woman’s breasts and eggs symbolizing a woman’s ovaries. Stein states that custard, the ultimate symbol of the female form, is “better than a little thing that has mellow real mellow. It is better than lakes whole lakes, it is better than seeding” (Stein 22-23). Murphy suggests that this last line is Stein’s assertion that homosexual love is better than heterosexual love: “The “recipe” ends with the assertion that “it is better than seeding,” that is, lesbian love is better than heterosexual love where “seeding” occurs. … in this “double-directed” discourse, her redefinition of “custard” simultaneously redefines what’s really cooking between women” (Murphy 397). Stein’s discussion of socially unconventional topics is hidden beneath layers of conventional cooking terms. Like Dickinson, Stein weaves levels of subliminal meaning beneath traditional words and convoluted uses of syntax. This “inaccessible cookbook” that she constructs serves as both a denigration and a repurposing of traditional heteronormative language.

The Inaccessibility of Stein’s Experimental Form as Linked to Her Use of the Continuous Present as a Rejection of Heteronormative Language

The inaccessibility of Stein’s work is a key characteristic of her experimentation with form. Critics have long deemed her work inaccessible or incomprehensible due to deviations from accepted grammatical and narrative structures. Claudia Franken writes that readers and critics in the 1930s were not receptive to Stein’s Tender Buttons, or any of her other experimental works, primarily because for them, “it was not clear what Stein was talking about and that she could not be understood (alternatively, that she was inaccessible, incomprehensible, unreadable, not interpretable, or, simply, unbearable)” (Franken 21). This inaccessibility makes Stein’s work uncomfortable for the reader; however, Stein is aware of the level of unease in her
reader and uses this to interweave controversial topics into her work. Elizabeth Ammons argues in her book *Conflicting Stories* that this first reaction of confusion stems from an aversion to language that defies cultural norms embedded in the reader’s schema of literacy and literature:

> it is safe to say that for everyone the immediate effect of reading her mature experimental work is incomprehension, not knowing where we are or how to operate. Stein makes us start over. We cannot rely on what we have been taught about language, literature, reading, and hence, in literate culture, even thinking itself. (Ammons 88)

As a writer, Stein pushes the boundaries of expression through language by stripping grammar and narrative structure to its bones, and then shaping those bones into an unrecognizable form. Readers are uncomfortable with this mode of expression because, as Vernon Loggins explains in his book *I Hear America ...: Literature in the United States Since 1900*, Stein’s language, “is thought in the nude—not dressed up in the clothes of time-worn rhetoric” (Loggins 327). Stein views the way we think about language as an external layer of clothing draped over more innate forms of expression. By removing this external layer, Stein is able to begin again with a language free from social convention, and therefore is able to explore ideas that are also free from social convention using this new language.

One of the primary concerns of readers who consider Stein’s work to be inaccessible is whether or not it bears any relation to concrete external ideas outside of the words themselves. Ammons suggest that there are two camps when it comes to interpreting the relation to external reference in Stein’s work – those who believe that Stein’s experimental work does not have referential meaning, and those that do:
for many readers what Stein offers at her most experimental are simply constellations of words—patterns, rhythms—employed not to evoke meaning outside the text but to exist in and of themselves, without external reference. … For other readers, … Stein’s work even at its seemingly most abstract probably does have referential meaning, though the references are highly encoded, often to disguise lesbian subject matter. (Ammons 89)

My analysis of Stein’s experimentation with form falls within the latter group, as I agree with her claim that this highly coded language is used to integrate lesbian subject matter into a non-traditional grammatical and narrative structure. This coded language can be seen through Stein’s use of the technique she refers to as the “continuous present.”

Stein first references the continuous present in “Composition as Explanation,” where she states that she had developed this technique when writing *Three Lives*, but referred to it as a “prolonged present” then and did not come up with the term “continuous present” until later on: “In beginning writing I wrote a book called Three Lives this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called Melanctha. … I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one” (Stein 3). Even in her explanations of her literary techniques, Stein uses the same convoluted grammatical structure she uses in her experimental work. She then goes on to define what she means by the continuous present:

Continuous present is one thing and beginning again and again is another thing. These are both things. And then there is using everything. This brings us again to composition this the using everything. The using everything brings us to composition and this to composition. A continuous present and using everything and beginning again. (Stein 524)
In this theory, Stein overlaps the schemas of perception and of traditional grammatical and narrative structures. She asserts that the human mind is constantly organizing thoughts in the present, and that the past, present, and future all exist in the present time. Instead of there being a sequential order to narrative thought (first this occurred, then this, and then this), all thought, action, and memory occurs simultaneously and continuously. Critics frequently suggest that through the continuous present, Stein disrupts linear patterns of thought; however, Stein does not throw out a linear structure – she simply switches the direction of the plane of traditional narrative thought. Conventional literature exists on a vertical plane, with ideas stacking on top of one another. Stein flips this plane so that it is horizontal – everything is equal and occurs at the same time and is absorbed all at once. This technique is often described in cinematic terms, as a motion picture camera breaking up the action into multiple frames.

As Stein explains in “Composition as Explanation,” *Three Lives* (and more specifically, “Melanctha”) serves as the first experimental work in which she uses the continuous present. Much like her repetitive language in *Tender Buttons*, in “Melanctha” Stein uses the continuous present to present a structure that is cyclical. One way that Stein employs the continuous present is by using key terms over and over again in order to convey a sense of being stuck in the same moment despite the fact that time is passing. One key term that Stein uses repeatedly throughout “Melanctha” is “now” or “always now.” In his book, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*, Stephen Kern argues that the use of the continuous present through the repetition of the phrase “always now” creates a parallel between the marriage of Melanctha and Jeff and the structure of narrative time, showcasing the realities of their relationship:

In *Melanctha* Stein adapted the continuous present tense and repetition of adverbials of time with the formula ‘always now’ to capture how characters and
marriages never get beyond their core nature as defined by some arbitrary moment. Melanctha’s troubled marriage with Jeff cannot change significantly because it is, like the structure of Stein’s narrative time, stuck in a continuous present, repeatedly beginning again. (Kern 102-3)

The word “now” suggests that something has changed between this moment and a moment before it. Stein manipulates this commonly used narrative structure, and instead of connoting ideas of change across the past, present, and future with words like “then,” “now,” and “soon,” she repeats the use of the present “now” to show that nothing has changed despite the time-signifier. For instance, in the beginning of their relationship, the word “now” juxtaposed with the word “seemed” shows the uncertainty buried beneath their outwardly blissful relationship:

“Every day now, Jeff seemed to be coming nearer, to be really loving. … Every day now, they seemed to be having more and more, both together, of this strong, right feeling” (Stein 177). This feeling of uncertainty grows as the relationship becomes more tangled, and again Stein uses the word “now” to connote the idea of the continuous present in their relationship: “Always now he never felt really at ease with her, even when they were good friends together. Always now he felt, with her, he could not be really honest to her” (Stein 185). In this passage, the phrase “always now” is juxtaposed with the word “felt,” which, like “seemed,” shows an increasing sense of unease.

The final juxtaposition Stein uses comes towards the end of the story, where any sentiment of hesitancy is lost, and “now” is juxtaposed with “knew”: “Now he knew he could never really want her. Now he knew he never any more could really trust her” (Stein 203). This would appear to be the end of Jeff and Melanctha’s relationship, but Stein throws in one more use of the continuous present, again using the juxtaposition of “now” and “knew” only pages
later with a drastically different meaning: “Now Jeff knew very well what it was to love Melanctha. Now Jeff Campbell knew he was really understanding. Now Jeff knew what it was to be good to Melanctha. Now Jeff was good to her always” (Stein 215). The “now” shows how Jeff thinks that something has changed and that “now” he can truly love her, when actually nothing has changed. Jeff and Melanctha’s relationship has come full circle by the end of the story, beginning again just like the continuous present. This use of the continuous present creates a feeling of claustrophobia, which could suggest that heterosexual relationships are claustrophobic, repetitive, and predictable as compared to homosexual relationships. Whether or not Stein meant this to be a criticism of heterosexual relationships, “Melanctha” serves as the first instance of Stein using the continuous present to disrupt traditional narrative structures. Once she honed and perfected the technique, she began to use it in her more experimental writing as a way to defy traditional norms that use traditional language.

After *Three Lives* was published in 1909, Stein began working on *Tender Buttons*, where she continued to develop her technique of the continuous present, this time using it to more unambiguously convey lesbian undertones. Returning to Ammons’ claim that there are two camps when it comes to considering the link to external references in Stein’s work (those who believe her text has referential meaning and those who do not), while it may be easier to argue that it does not have referential meaning in some of her earlier experimental works, one can clearly see the external references developing as she hones her craft. Stein uses the continuous present in *Tender Buttons* to both portray the ways in which heterosexuality restricts female desire and pleasure, and then also propose new means of women achieving that desire and pleasure in ways that circumnavigate heterosexual standards. Often, Stein enacts the continuous present using the present participle in order to show that the action the verb is describing is
ongoing. Near the beginning of “Rooms,” Stein uses present participle verbs to form the continuous present in order to point to a distinction between desire and pleasure for women in heterosexual and homosexual relationships: “Something that is an erection is that which stands and feeds and silences a tin which is swelling. This makes no diversion that is to say what can please exaltation, that which is cooking” (Stein 29). The “erection” that “stands” clearly refers to male anatomy, and therefore to heterosexual desire, as it both “feeds” and “silences” the “tin which is swelling” (or a woman’s vagina which is sexually aroused). The “feeds” implies that the male holds the power in the relationship, while the “silences” only enforces that idea of power by showing that the female is oppressed by this sexual act. The present participle is used to reference feminine and lesbian terms; both “swelling” and “cooking” refer to female anatomy and sexuality. In the second line, the speaker asserts that “This” (referring to the heterosexual intimacy occurring in the first line) “makes no diversion” and what brings “exaltation” is in fact “that which is cooking.” Cooking, as I discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, is something Stein connects to her own lesbian relationship, and often uses to indicate lesbian connotations in her experimental work. Through the present participle, the “tin which is swelling” is juxtaposed with “that which is cooking,” suggesting that it is the lesbian relationship that brings the woman both pleasure and a sense of autonomy in her sexuality detached from the restrictions of heterosexual dynamics. As in “Melanctha” where the continuous present is used to reveal the truth in relationships, here the continuous present highlights the truth and shows how in heterosexual relationships, women are confined, while in lesbian relationships they are able to be freed from this dynamic of male control.

The continuous present is one of the primary reasons that Stein’s work is so often deemed inaccessible. Critics often describe her work as inaccessible to the reader because they, as
educated, mature readers, have been exposed to certain logics of linguistic structures from a young age that seem to be defied in Stein’s work. Loggins states that Stein believed that young children would be best able to comprehend her work:

Stein insists that a child of five can understand any of her writings. What she means is that the laws of logic to which custom decrees that a man must adjust his thinking are replaced in her poems by a free association of words as they play and dance and toss themselves about in the consciousness. A child delights in such mental exercise, and is constantly engaged in it. (Loggins 325)

This statement that a young child would be able to understand her work perfectly suggests that in order to understand and appreciate Stein’s work, one must let go of these preexisting ideas about language and, like a child, not be restrained by socially defined grammatical rules. Stein is similar to Dickinson in that she does not trust certain aspects of conventional form to portray the complexities of human emotion, and the diversities of human interactions; therefore, she creates her own unconventional form that she believes more accurately depicts these complexities and diversities. Rather than attempting to make her work inaccessible to her readers, she strives to push readers beyond that with which they are familiar. Dickinson and Stein are not “inaccessible” writers, but rather, writers unconcerned with the comfort level of their readers. In an interview as part of a book on innovative Canadian women’s poetry, Canadian poet Erín Moure suggests that questioning the “accessibility” of a poet’s work is futile, as poetry inherently defies the accessible:

And I don’t know what ‘accessible’ has to do with it. I gently refuse that framing. The accessible, as I have always argued, as others have argued, is what we already know. And poetry operates beyond that, I think. So does life! All poetry,
whether it engages traditional forms or dictions or open forms, or conceptualizations, has to press us just past the limit where our knowing ends.

(Moure 206)

Stein and Dickinson are writers who break traditional forms in order to push their readers’ knowledge and openness to certain topics that are not accepted in their society. By pushing them to move past this difficult form, they are simultaneously arming them with the tools to understand difficult concepts. If they can get their readers past the hurdle of decoding their form, they can get them to open their eyes to the socially unacceptable topics hiding behind that form. Their readers have become accustomed to a gendered, heteronormative rhetoric, and so they need to break free from that before they can begin to explore ideas that are un-gendered and defy heteronormative culture.

The Influence of Visual Culture on Stein’s Portrayal of Feminine Identity and Female Empowerment through Language

Stein’s experimentation with form is significantly influenced by visual culture during her time, specifically by the artists whose work she collected with her brother while in Paris. Matisse and Picasso were two of the most influential artists whose work she collected as part of her gallery at 27 Rue de Fleurus. Stein first collected Picasso’s work with her brother in 1905, long before he was well known. This shows that Stein recognized something in Picasso’s experimentation on the canvas to be new and innovative, and possibly, that it was aligned with her own aims in experimenting with language. Stein alludes to the influence that artists like Matisse and Picasso hold in her experimental writing in the title of a collection of prose poems she wrote between 1909 and 1912 called Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein. Although the work has received little critical attention, it serves as a paramount example of the ways that
visual culture influences her experimentation with form. In her book, *Gertrude Stein*, Lucy Daniel suggests that *Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein* is the first example of Stein throwing rules of grammar and syntax out the window completely: “Up until these works, she had written grammatically correct sentences, although her rhythms and repetitions had been unusual. Here, however, she no longer felt obliged to do that. This is where the syntax itself began to break apart” (Daniel 102). This discernable abandonment of grammatical rules in a work so heavily influenced by visual culture suggests that Stein’s experimentation with form is inextricably linked to her perception of Picasso and Matisse’s deconstruction on the canvas.

Stein employs cubist principles in her poetry in order to challenge a patriarchal landscape. Stein’s writing is inherently geometric; she layers language in seemingly disjointed ways, just as Picasso layers shapes in a fragmented and disorderly manner. In her article “Communications: Gertrude Stein,” modern poet Mina Loy states, “It has become the custom to say of her that she has done in words what Picasso has done with form” (Loy 180). The cubist elements of Stein’s writing can be seen in many of the techniques that she uses to deconstruct traditional schemas of language. Gabrielle Dean states in the first chapter of *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein* that Stein’s continuous present was influenced by Picasso’s work: “Picasso’s attraction to spatial flatness was important as a model for Stein’s gradual crafting of the technique she later called the continuous present, a kind of temporal flatness” (Dean 31). In addition to the continuous present, Stein’s use of fragmented images in *Tender Buttons* serves as an example of the influence of cubism on her experimentation with form.

Picasso makes the foreground, subject, and background of his painting equal by fragmenting the canvas into equal parts. In the same way, Stein presents an image that is equal
by denying the traditional schema of emphasizing one aspect of language over another.

“Objects,” for instance, is a collection of still life caricatures that are somewhat indistinguishable, save their titles, due to Stein’s syntactical amendments. In the passage titled “A RED HAT,” the reader can infer from the title only that the object described is a red hat (the same is true with many of Picasso’s works, where the simplistic title allows the viewer to reconsider the seemingly objectless work). The image of the hat itself, however, is circumvented through the omission of nouns, verbs, and other basic syntactical elements: “A dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinarily, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it” (Stein 5). The noun is omitted until the second half of the sentence, where the hat is only referred to as “it,” with no distinguishable features to delineate its existence. Stein’s most frequent noun and verb usages in this chapter are in the words “it” and “is,” both of which strip basic referential schema from the sentence and force the reader to rethink the structure of language in order to understand the image. Stein is able to accomplish something that Picasso cannot through visual representation, which is to tell her reader that something is red, and then strip that object of its redness, therefore leaving the reader with an indeterminate conception of that image. By presenting an image of an object, but then entirely removing the essence of that object through simple syntactical mechanisms, Stein illustrates the power of language to omit and circumvent the critical elements of an entity while still making reference to that entity, but stripping it of the qualities that make it unique. This concept submits that language and literature have the power to still include a marginalized group in a text, but omit key characteristics of that group or certain elements integral to its identity using traditional language and literary devices.

Another key feature of Picasso’s experimentation with visual expression that Stein adapts in her own experimentation with form is his dismemberment of the human form. Picasso reduces
the human body to its foundational structures; arms and legs and facial features are all presented to the viewer at once, disrupting traditional schemas for identifying the human form. Similarly, Stein breaks language down to its fundamental core in order to both show the ways in which it has become shrouded by tradition and social norms, but also to show how, by reinventing the meaning of these words, one can surpass these socially defined terminologies and create a new language that supports counter-traditional ideologies. Matisse, like Picasso, was also interested in new and experimental portrayals of the human body – specifically the female body. He is known for making the female body grotesque – features are distorted and discolored (although not as drastically as Picasso’s), bodies are overly sexualized or conversely, overly desexualized. The figures are still recognizable, but they force the viewers to confront ideas of how they typically see women’s bodies depicted in art, and what it means to portray a realistic image of a woman’s body, or if there even is such a thing as a realistic depiction, as no one figure can serve as a representation of all female form. By making women ugly, he makes society question why they place such value on making women beautiful. Stein attempts to infer the same conclusions in her poetry. In “Many Many Women,” one of the pieces in her work Matisse, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein, she repeats phrases linking a woman’s identity to her physical appearance: “Any being one is one some are describing. Any one being one is one that one is describing. Some one being one and being the one being beautifully described as completely beautiful one, that one being the one being beautifully described and being beautifully described very often” (Stein 172). This shows the ways in which conceptions of women’s beauty as portrayed through language and art and other cultural products are generalized and reduce a woman’s identity, as she is being described in exactly the way that “any one being is being [described]”. Stein’s experimentation with form
can be seen not only as a dismemberment of language, but also as a dismemberment of the female body into commoditized parts.

Stein dismembers the female form and the construct of female identity in her experimentation with form in order to present the female body as being liberated from centers of masculine control. Stein’s fascination with the significance of human anatomy may stem from her experience in medical school at Johns Hopkins. This translates into her exploration of the power of the female form in her poetry. Stein reinstates ideas of control to female sexuality by producing images of sexuality centered around this newly constructed female form. In *Tender Buttons*, especially in the section “Objects,” Stein acknowledges the ways in which women are often relegated to being described as physical objects, but also restructures this objectification so that women are given back some of the power that is lost in this societal marginalization. In her book *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, Lisa Ruddick submits that in a section of “Objects” called “BOOK.” Stein first shows the ways that women’s bodies are devalued, and then, subsequently, places value upon them. The section shows the ways in which the male body is valued over the female body, by first describing the male body as “Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head does that mean soap” (Stein 11). The female body is then described using only references to feminine physical traits (wearing earrings and breeding) and the female anatomy is described as something not to be valued: “Suppose ear rings, that is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest a pillar. Chest not valuable, be papered” (Stein 11). The following line then elaborates on this idea that the female chest is not valuable, suggesting that women should “Cover up cover up the two with a little piece of string and hope rose and green, green” (Stein 11). While the first half of this line is obviously derogatory, and, as Ruddick states,
“The cover-up is the burial of the womb or the breast, signifying the denial that women’s bodies have any special dignity or power” (Ruddick 209), the second half of the line juxtaposes this image of a woman’s body with the symbols of a rose and hope. Ruddick suggests that the “rose may symbolize the female body itself, as in the poem ‘Red Roses.’ If so, the flower is a locus of life that cannot be entirely controlled by paternal law” (Ruddick 209-210). This image of flowering and blooming also suggests a sexual connotation, signifying that the female body can rise out of this objectification through a reclamation of female sexuality separate from the male gaze and patriarchal relegations.

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What is considered “inaccessible” about Stein’s work can only become accessible through an understanding of Stein’s experimentation with form and the techniques she uses to construct a new language that defies male-controlled and heterosexual norms. Leibowitz suggests that it is perhaps the ambiguity of responses evoked by reading Stein’s work that makes her readers hesitant to read Stein: “This large mythic corpus we call Gertrude Stein seems always to produce double images—female/male, playful/pretentious, fascinating/maddening, amusing/a bore. She has enlarged our range of possibilities in prose and poetry beyond comprehension, for which we are grateful and annoyed” (Leibowitz 87). Readers of literature are conditioned to expect clear images with which they are familiar, and language that is easily decipherable. When they are presented with something experimental, something that does not fit their schema for what literature looks like, they are displeased and hesitant to continue reading. Stein pushes her readers to overcome this displeasure, and move, not towards pleasure derived from familiarity, but towards pleasure derived from a new sense of understanding and knowledge.
Many readers, when encountering Stein for the first time, feel as though they are reading a foreign language. Herbert Leibowitz compares the effect of Stein’s experimentation with form to reading Middle English: “The effect is reminiscent of Middle English untranslated, full of glimpsed significations, but also studded with opacities confronting the reader primarily with tactile (phonemic or graphic) qualities” (Leibowitz 89). This analogy highlights Stein’s concentration on returning language to its original infrastructure. Reading her experimentation with form is like reading an ancient form of the English language, because, without changing the syntax of words, she restores them to their basic origins. Leibowitz then goes on to suggest that through this experience of confronting Stein’s new language, readers are not confronting language as “abstraction from,” but rather they are prompted to “[return] to words as objects in the process of becoming” (Leibowitz 89). Stein is not moving back in time by returning language to its origins, but rather moving forwards by creating a language for the future that portrays all life experience, both traditional and non-traditional.
Chapter 3
“Words were her plague and words were her redemption”: H.D.’s Revival of Feminist Language and Literature through Palimpsestic Form

H.D., like many other prominent female writers, is best known for her literary – and personal – relationship with a prominent male writer, Ezra Pound, and for her role in the imagiste movement whose name Pound coined. Pound, in fact, created the pen name H.D., short for Hilda Doolittle, in 1912, when he affixed the signature *H.D. Imagiste* to a small collection of her poetry. Galvin suggests that this continual association with the Imagist movement is both “a blessing and a curse.”: “Critics have tended to exaggerate the centrality of imagism to H.D.’s lengthy and various writing career. To be sure, H.D. has not been forgotten as the best of the imagistes; rather, other aspects of her poetics have been frequently obscured by critical assessments that rely on this association reductively” (Galvin 106). While imagism is what H.D. is known for, I would disagree that H.D. “has not been forgotten as the best of the imagistes.” Even within the scope of imagism, names like James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound garner much more attention than H.D. Comparisons aside, imagism is repeatedly the term most associated with H.D. and her literary work.

In this chapter, I depart from H.D.’s status as an imagist poet, just as I rejected Dickinson’s reputation as an unrestrained, spontaneous recluse and Stein’s reputation as inaccessible and avoidant of attaching meaning to language. H.D.’s status as a member of the Imagiste movement is pertinent when discussing her overall body of work and the evolution of her literary career; however, it obscures some of the more important elements of her experimental form, especially those that break away from gendered restrictions. In an effort to align H.D. with Stein and Dickinson within the avant-garde female poetic canon, I concentrate
on less frequently discussed elements of H.D.’s experimentation with form, such as her use of translation and her feminist revisions of mythological women.

The thread that connects these forms of experimentation is the idea of the palimpsest. In the title page of her book of prose, *Palimpsest*, H.D. defines it as “a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another” (H.D. 2). Palimpsests were created primarily between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of the scarcity of materials. Palimpsests were typically produced on pieces of vellum, or a thinly stretched animal skin used as parchment. A chemical solution was often used to strip the vellum of the old writing and create a blank slate for the new. In his book, *Greek Palimpsest Fragments of the Gospel of Saint Luke*, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles explains that palimpsestic literature did not stem from a neglect for the original text, but rather, a recognition of the illegibility of the original text, and a desire to repurpose the writing material: “This was often the case, not from disregard for the books which were destroyed when their material was employed for some new purpose, but because of the older volume having been worn out, or having in part become illegible” (Tregelles xxi). The erasure of these original texts was not completely permanent due to imperfect methods of removal. It was not until the rise of more modern technology that literary scholars were able to unearth some of the literature that had been lost through this process, disintering layers of literary history buried just beneath the surface.

H.D. employs the metaphor of the palimpsest frequently throughout her work, most discernably in her first work of prose, *Palimpsest*, where she layers three distinct narratives on top of one another in mixed genres and varying uses of poetry and prose. H.D.’s perception and application of the palimpsest in her experimentation with form bears many similarities to Stein’s idea of the continuous present. The etymology of the word palimpsest comes from the Greek
παλίμψηστος, meaning “scratched again,” or “scraped again.” This rhetoric echoes the language Stein uses when describing her continuous present: “beginning again and again.” Galvin understands H.D.’s concept of the palimpsest as being one of “temporal continuity, or perhaps more precisely, simultaneity” (Galvin 110). The idea of flattening the arc of history and placing the past, the present, and the future on one continuous plane resonates both with Stein and with H.D. Unlike Stein, however, H.D.’s focus is on the reintegration of certain uses of language and cultural norms produced in ancient forms of literature within a modernist tradition. H.D.’s palimpsestic, experimental writing insists that not only are earlier texts integral to understanding more modern literature, but also that by revising modern language and literature through the constructs of these earlier texts, feminist and sexually liberated ideologies can begin to come up to the surface.

Reading H.D.’s work as formally experimental, especially within the same canon as some of Stein’s extremely avant-garde works of poetry and prose, can require some redefinition of what it means to experiment with form. Her language is not inaccessible, like Stein’s, nor does her work appear to be constantly in a state of revision with variant words and stanzas like Dickinson’s. What makes her form experimental is its commitment to acting as a work of palimpsestic literature, and much like Stein’s continuous present, blending together different places and spaces through a modern revision of language and literature. Like Dickinson and Stein, every formal decision must be regarded as significant and purposeful in H.D.’s adherence to a palimpsestic structure.

Where Dickinson’s poetry can be viewed through the metaphor of a nautilus shell, as in Marianne Moore’s poem “The Paper Nautilus,” H.D.’s work can be metaphorically condensed to the image of a palimpsestic tablet, but one in which previous texts have been poorly erased so
that traces peek out from beneath the surface text. Like Dickinson and Stein, H.D. strives for truthfulness in her writing and in her experimental endeavors towards palimpsestic writing. She wants to portray human experience in the most accurate way, but also in a way that is all encompassing. Unlike Dickinson, however, the layers she crafts are meant to reveal rather than subvert ideologies that go against societal convention. Where Dickinson “Tell[s] all the truth but tell[s] it slant—,” H.D. uncovers truths that have been hidden beneath layers of cultural variations in literature across time.

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In addition to H.D.’s fascination with palimpsestic literature, she was also, from a young age, captivated by mythological culture and literature. H.D. grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where her father was a professor of astronomy at Lehigh University. H.D. was always enthralled by the myths associated with the stars and celestial beings. Like Dickinson, she attended an all-women’s college, Bryn Mawr, but she withdrew due to failing health and grades. Her studies thereafter were separate from any formal schooling. Many of the influential texts that she read as a young woman were referred to her by her literary friends Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. She and Pound were engaged for a short time, but the engagement dissolved primarily as a result of her family’s disapproval. After Pound, Frances Josepha Gregg was her next significant love interest. Galvin argues that many scholars tend to ignore H.D.’s bisexuality when talking about influences for her poetry: “While it has always been fairly well known that H.D. was bisexual, critics and biographers have tended to emphasize the significance of her heterosexual relationships to her poetic development” (Galvin 106). H.D.’s bisexuality plays a significant role in her work, but also in her fascination with the field of mythological literature.
Galvin goes on to suggest that one of the reasons H.D. may have sought out Greek mythology and become so influenced by it was her desire to participate in and promote discussions of homosexuality: “H.D., having no ‘gay community’ as we now know it, sought for the traces of her cultural heritage in the materials available to her at the time, and the mythologies and poetries of the ancient Greeks were the most obvious place to start” (Galvin 111). Since H.D. had no gay community – at least in the sense of a more modern definition of gay community – she sought out traces of a homonormative culture in ancient mythologies. In classical antiquity, depictions of homosexual relationships, or otherwise non-heteronormative lifestyles, were widespread and socially acceptable. While these relationships were more commonly depicted as being between two men, lesbian relationships were also portrayed in ancient Greek literature, namely in the work of the Greek lyric poet Sappho from the island of Lesbos. H.D. adopts and adapts these references to nontraditional ideas about sexuality in ancient Greek language and literature in her own modernist work, blurring the boundaries between ancient and modern cultures in order to assimilate non-heteronormative and feminist ideals into her work.

H.D. and Translation

H.D.’s fascination with mythology and reshaping and reintroducing mythological forms carries over into her translation of ancient Greek literature. One of her most frequently translated writers is Euripides; she translated choruses from plays such as Bacchae and Hecuba, as well as the entirety of Ion. In his book, The Classical World of H.D., Thomas Burnett Swann asserts, “Among ancient writers from whom H.D. drew her inspiration, Euripides deserves first place. … in the introduction [to her translation of Ion] she classed him with Aeschylus and Sophocles as
one of the world’s three greatest dramatists” (Swann 4-5). While H.D. is also influenced by, and translates, the work of other classical writers such as Homer, Sappho, and Theocritus, Euripides serves as one of her primary influences for remodeling work through translation. H.D. believes that poets like Homer portray traditional and sexist ideologies subjugating women throughout their work. While she does make reference to these myths in her poetry, she uses feminist revisionist mythology to reshape the ideological structure of the myths. Euripides’ work, however, needs less reshaping. In her book *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück*, Elizabeth Caroline Dodd suggests that one of the reasons that H.D. chooses to translate Euripides’ work is that “She found in his plays intriguing, complex women characters, and plots that were in their own unfolding sympathetic to women. … Finding him to be inclusive rather than exclusive toward a woman reader, she read him—and, in a way, rewrote him” (Dodd 45). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Euripides’ plays are relatively feminist in their complex representations of female characters, and for this reason, H.D. uses his work as a canvas for her reinterpretation and translation.

Despite Euripides’ comparatively positive portrayal of women, H.D.’s translations of many of his plays read more like a revision than a paraphrased version of the text. In her translation of the Chorus of the Women of Chalkis from Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, H.D. omits or significantly alters many lines referring to the women’s adoration of male heroes, or statements suggesting their inferiority to men. In a version of *Iphigenia in Aulis* translated into English by Edward Einhorn, the sixth and seventh lines read, “Here I stand so that I might behold the Achaean army,/ so that I can see the heroes my husband told me of” (Einhorn 6-7). In H.D.’s translation, she omits the words “heroes” and “husband” and instead describes the Greeks as being not fully men: “I come to see the battle-line/ And the ships rowed here/ By these
spirits—/ The Greeks are but half-man” (H.D. 9-12). She adds a reference to spirits, suggesting that the victory of these heroes is not entirely theirs, and then calls them “half-man,” again depreciating their status.

H.D.’s translation differs from many traditional translations in her elucidation of chauvinist portrayals of women’s sexuality. In a later stanza, Einhorn translates the women seeing soldiers in their camp as, “Here I ran through the grove of Artemis/ where I saw the altar, ready for a sacrifice./ Here I saw the soldier’s camp,/ their dwellings, their steeds, and their armaments,/ and felt my cheeks grow red with youthful modesty” (Einhorn 17-21). H.D. translates these same lines as, “I crept through the woods/ Between the altars:/ Artemis haunts the place./ Shame, scarlet, fresh-opened—a flower,/ Strikes across my face./ And sudden—light upon shields,/ Low huts—the armed Greeks,/ Circle of horses” (H.D. 29-36). Here, H.D. translates the women’s cheeks as being flushed with “shame” rather than “youthful” modesty. This choice in diction implies that the narrator’s cheeks are flushed due to the shame that society places upon young women’s sexualities and their encounters with men, not due to any sense of virginal reticence. The line lengths in this passage, and throughout H.D.’s translation, are overall much shorter than Einhorn’s lines, which allows their chorus to read like an incantation. As in “Eurydice,” H.D. gives power to the voice of the female speakers through robust, paratactic sentences.

H.D.’s translations serve as an extension of her poetry in their objective of using mythology to illustrate the ways in which language and literature are intrinsically shaped by dominant social groups and traditions. In addition to illuminating the formation of norms, through the revision and modernization of mythology, the translator can break down these social norms that have become embedded in language and literature. In order to do this, however, the
translator must allow himself or herself the liberty to alter the text, sometimes significantly, from its original version. Swann compares H.D.’s philosophies on translation to those of T. S. Eliot, arguing that both translators believe in the revision of a translated text instead of a literal reproduction:

Like Eliot, she felt that a translator should not attempt a slavish reproduction of a Greek verse form in a language for which that form might not be suited. Rather, he should utilize the idiom of his own day—in H.D.’s case, a free verse whose cadences approximated those of human speech—and achieve a poem or play which was more a re-creation than a translation. (Swann 9)

H.D. shies away from the idea of literature being translated just in terms of linguistic accuracy. She wants the translator to use the “idiom of his own day” and revise the rhetoric according to shifts in culture norms and forms of expression. Translation is, in this regard, a kind of palimpsestic practice for H.D., as she is essentially erasing an old text and rewriting over it a more modern interpretation that still pays homage to its sources. H.D. expands upon this idea of translation as a reshaping of cultural norms through the protagonist in her novel, Bid Me To Live. The protagonist, Julia, is a translator whose views on translation resonate with H.D.’s own views on translation. The narrator describes Julia’s opinion on translation as governed by a revisionist approach:

She brooded over each word, as if to hatch it. Then she tried to forget each word, for ‘translations’ enough existed and she was no scholar. She did not want to ‘know’ Greek in that sense. … Anyone can translate the meaning of the word. She wanted the shape, the feel of it, the character of it, as if it had been freshly minted. She felt that the old manner of approach was as toward hoarded treasure, but
treasure that had passed through too many hands, had been too carefully assessed
by the grammarians. She wanted to coin new words. (H.D. 163)

Translation, according to Julia, stifles any sense of creativity or innovation that comes with new
readership. This approach to translation corresponds with the principles of reader-response
theory, in that the reader’s perception of the text alters the meaning of the text, and that new
meaning is then conveyed by the translator presenting this new interpretation through a revised
version of the text. By translating a text straightforwardly and without revision, one eliminates
the element of individuality, and also the ability to reinterpret or reintroduce any non-traditional
ideas. The reference to coining new words in the last line of the above passage from Bid Me To
Live resonates with both Dickinson and Stein’s attempts to create a new language for women. By
reshaping mythology through translation, H.D. illuminates how language and rhetoric have
become socialized to omit certain marginalized groups, and introduces new revisions of these
texts through translation in order to reshape the portrayal of women in mythology.

**Reclaiming the Earth Goddesses**

Like visual art for Stein, mythology serves as a primary influence for H.D.’s poetry. H.D.
is influenced not only by ancient texts and their cultural significance, but also by scholarly
investigations of mythology. One scholar in particular whose theories greatly impacted H.D.’s
work is the mythological scholar Jane Ellen Harrison. In her research on the origins of Greek
religion, Harrison came to the conclusion that there were two separate pantheons in ancient
Greece: the well known and studied Olympic Pantheon ruled by Zeus, and the lesser known
Chthonic Pantheon ruled by goddesses of the Earth. In her 1903 book, *Prolegomena to the Study
of Greek Religion*, Harrison suggested the older Chthonic Pantheon had largely been ignored due
to the pervasiveness of the mythology of the Olympic Pantheon (in which goddesses have less power than the gods) in works made famous by male poets such as Homer and Phidias. Harrison argued that viewing Homer’s work as a definitive guide to ancient Greek religion is an oversight, and that in order to rediscover the forgotten Chthonic Pantheon, one must view Homer’s descriptions of Greek religion as a literary endeavor, one which does not pay homage to its religious inspirations. She wrote that viewing Homer’s work as simultaneously a primitive form of Greek literature and Greek religion misinterprets Homer’s work as being based in any existent Greek theology: “The Olympians of Homer are no more primitive than his hexameters” (Harrison vii). One of the main objectives of Harrison’s Prolegomena was to move beyond this misinterpretation of Homeric “theology” and instead resurface more primitive and authentic forms of Greek theology, namely the earth goddesses of the Chthonic tradition that she suggested had been “ignored or suppressed by Homer” (Harrison vii). In her 1912 work, Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion, Harrison wrote:

The Olympian gods—that is, the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and Pheidias and the mythographers—seemed to me like a bouquet of cut-flowers whose bloom is brief, because they have been severed from their roots. To find those roots we must burrow deep into a lower stratum of thought, into those chthonic cults which underlay their life and from which sprang all their brilliant blossoming. (Harrison vii)

This rhetoric of excavating and reviving the roots of a culture resonates with H.D.’s ideology of palimpsestic literature. Just as Harrison’s research focused on unearthing more primitive forms of female deities, H.D. unearths styles of language and cultural references that have long been forgotten through her experimentation with form, and shows how these neglected ideologies
enable discussions about women, gender, and sexuality that are not able to be explored through traditional poetry and language.

H.D. was undoubtedly influenced by Jane Harrison’s research, and this influence can be seen in her focus on female deities in her work, as well as her resurfacing of mythological tradition. In her book, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*, Eileen Gregory states, “Harrison’s work was pivotal in establishing widely accepted arguments about Greek religion, and her ideas were in circulation in H.D.’s intellectual milieu” (Gregory 117). H.D., like Harrison, questions how the female deities of Chthonic cults became relegated. Using both these earlier female earth goddesses and later Homeric goddesses, H.D. challenges the language used in traditional literature to talk about the female body and mind, and reintegrates older ideologies of female strength and authority using a palimpsestic structure. H.D. seeks to use myth as a way of first tracing patterns in the emergence of traditional social constructs in language and literature and, subsequently, deconstructing those patterns and societal conventions.

In her earlier poetry collections, such as *Sea Garden*, H.D. pays homage to these primitive earth goddesses. In “The Shrine,” she gestures toward an unnamed goddess who watches over the sea. The subtitle of the poem, placed in parentheses, is (“She Watches Over the Sea”), which implies that the subject of this poem is a woman. This implication is then supported by the mentions of men being tempted by her or blaming her for not protecting them: “Nay, you are great, fierce evil—/ you are the land-blight—/ you have tempted men/ but they perished on your cliffs” (H.D. 8-11). The speaker of the poem addresses this unnamed goddess directly through the second person, asserting that she is “great, fierce, evil—”. The speaker then contradicts this initial commendation through the repetition of the phrase “You are useless” at the beginning of the sixth and seventh stanzas:
You are useless—
when the tides swirl
your boulders cut and wreck
the staggering ships.

You are useless,
O grave, O beautiful,
the landsmen tell it—I have heard—
you are useless. (H.D. 28-35)

The repetition of this phrase illustrates the course through which such sexist ideologies become engrained in the minds of both women and men through the gendered and sexist tropes of traditional language and literature. In the seventh stanza, the speaker uses the first person voice transitorily to show how these sexist ideologies travel and intensify from their inception, to their continued implementation in language and literature, to their prolonged effects on society at large. The first step, the inception, is unseen, as it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of many of these sexist tropes. The narrator highlights the second step however, their continued implementation in language and literature, through the phrase “You are useless,” repeated both in the first and last line of the seventh stanza. The third step is portrayed through the first person narration in the third line of the stanza, where the speaker asserts, “I have heard,” showing that this devaluation of the goddess has travelled down to a larger societal audience, who then perceives the goddess through these gendered and sexist ideologies. The landsmen in this stanza convey this slandering of the goddess through language and literature; they are the enforcers of
sexist ideologies. The first person voice emphasizes the effects that these patriarchal sentiments have on society at large.

In “The Wind Sleepers,” the nameless deities are also the earth goddesses. Just as in “The Shrine,” where the gender of the subject is implied through both the title and the positioning of the subject as separate from men in the poem, in this poem there are no gender-specific pronouns – the gender has to be ascertained through references and allusions. The speakers of this poem are an ambiguous “we,” the eponymous “Wind Sleepers” who have risen from their dormant status forgotten in the wind to reclaim their prominence in society. As in “The Shrine,” the gender of these speakers must be determined through interpretations of references made towards the relationship between the speakers and society. The speakers suggest that they have been relegated to the wind as a result of society’s neglecting to worship them, and call upon society to reinstate them as figures of adulation: “Tear—/ tear us an altar,/ tug at the cliff-boulders,/ pile them with the rough stones—/ we no longer/ sleep in the wind,/ propitiate us” (H.D. 10-6). These figures who have been abandoned and are so reliant on society to restore their status are the female earth goddesses who were replaced by the gods and goddesses of Homeric tradition.

The image of these goddesses sleeping in the wind, or lying just below the surface of literary tradition, is resonant of a palimpsestic structure, in which these women have been overwritten by a more popular literary form, but can be reintegrated by highlighting the ways in which they have been forgotten and exhuming them from below the surface. In the second stanza, the speakers assert, “We no longer sleep/ in the wind—/ we awoke and fled/ through the city gate” (H.D. 6-9). This image of sleeping in the wind suggests that these women have not been eradicated completely from literature and history, but rather have lain dormant due to a cultural move away from portraying women in power and towards portraying women as
subservient and lesser than men. The use of the verb “propitiate” — as well as other verbs such as “tear,” “tug,” and “pile” — as a direct command shows the lengths to which these women must go to attempt to have their voices heard. The response of the audience is absent from this poem, and so it is unclear whether their pleas will be met, or whether they will fall back into oblivion.

The speakers underscore that it is beyond their control to reinstate themselves into literature and regain societal recognition. They plead with their audience to worship them, as only society is capable of restoring their power by resurfacing their legacy through literature and language. The speakers make reference to the importance of reestablishing their presence through language and social culture in the fourth stanza, by asking their audience to “Chant in a wail/ that never halts,/ pace a circle and pay tribute/ with a song” (H.D. 17-20). The ideas of continuous chanting and paying tribute through song are resonant of the significance of oral culture in ancient Greece, a tradition within which these earth goddesses became forgotten. The speakers show that there will be resistance to their reinstatement, as outside forces, represented through the image of “the roar of a dropped wave” (H.D. 21), will attempt to break into their circle of chanting and song. They declare that when this happens, the only way to combat it is to “pour meted words/ of sea-hawks and gulls/ and sea-birds that cry/ discords” (H.D. 23-6). Here, the speakers emphasize the power of words and language to alter and defy social conventions. In order for women to regain a voice in society, strong female figures such as these earth goddesses need to be reintroduced to the literary canon. H.D. aims to illuminate, through poems like “The Shrine” and “The Wind Sleepers,” that not only have these early female deities been forgotten – or in the case of “The Shrine,” devalued – but also that their erasure and trivialization within the mythological canon creates a language based on the erasure and trivialization of women’s role in
society. Thus, according to H.D., the emergence of traditional social constructs such as sexist ideologies can be juxtaposed with the removal of female potency and influential female figures in literature.

**H.D.'s Implementation of Feminist Revisionist Mythology**

This idea of reclaiming a rich tradition of women in mythology is part of a larger faction of feminist thinking within the mythological canon known as feminist revisionist mythology. In her article, *The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*, Alicia Ostriker states that what distinguishes feminist revisionist mythmaking from other attempts to reclaim language for women is that these poets conduct “a vigorous and various invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are themselves preserved” (Ostriker 71). Instead of viewing mythology as an inoperative space for reconstructing a language for women, these poets embrace mythology as a productive vessel for generating feminist language and ideologies. Ostriker suggests that feminist revisionist mythology is essentially women “stealing” language and reclaiming it in order to replace patriarchal dogmas with feminist ideologies: “Women writers have always tried to steal the language. What several recent studies demonstrate poignantly is that throughout most of her history, the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in code form, disguising passion as piety, rebellion as obedience” (Ostriker 69). The reference to “code form” resonates with Dickinson’s creed of telling the truth but telling it slant, and Ostriker goes on to cite Dickinson as an example of this phenomenon. Although she does not group her with these revisionist mythmaking female poets, she recognizes the influence that her work held in their experimentation. Women typically recognized as belonging to this movement include poets like
Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. H.D. is not often grouped with these women, most likely due to
the formal experimental nature of her work. Poets like Sylvia Plath are experimental in the
content of their poetry, but less so in its form. Ostriker suggests that it is perhaps her evasion of
preeminent forms of diction that separates H.D. from this group:

The gaudy and abrasive colloquialism of Alta, Atwood, Plath, and Sexton, for
example, simultaneously modernizes what is ancient and reduces the verbal glow
that we are trained to associate with mythic material. Even H.D., who takes her
divinities entirely seriously, avoids the elevated or quasi-liturgical diction that, in
the educated reader, triggers the self-surrendering exaltation relied on by the
creators of such poems as *Four Quartets* or *The Cantos*. (Ostriker 87)

H.D.’s language in her poetry is very accessible, unlike Stein’s, because she does not want her
reader’s interaction with myth to be one of “self-surrendering exaltation.” Instead, she wants it to
be one of understanding and engagement with the mythology — and specifically, portrayals of
women in mythology — in a new presentation that isn’t as distanced as most traditional
applications. Despite these deviations from other poets within feminist revisionist mythology,
H.D. employs the revisionist aspects of the movement in order to reinstate feminist terms and
ideas into modern variations of mythological texts.

H.D. begins to employ techniques attendant to the ideals of feminist revisionist
mythology as she moves away from *Sea Garden*. In *Sea Garden*, she does not need to revise
myths in order to make them feminist; rather, she needs to resurface old myths that have been
forgotten and show how it was sexist ideologies that caused them to be neglected in the first
place. After *Sea Garden*, H.D. moves away from references to earlier earth goddesses and
towards references to female deities in the Olympic Pantheon. While this may seem
counterintuitive to the activity of exploring disregarded female symbols of power in mythology, her shift from the Chthonic Pantheon to the Olympic Pantheon enables her to fully reveal the richness of female power in mythological references. H.D. begins with the unearthing of the earlier forgotten pantheon of female deities, and then moves to a realm where women are typically portrayed as subservient to their male counterparts and brings them to the forefront. In this way she reshapes definitions of women in mythology in her later work by using the earlier figures of the earth goddesses as a precedent upon which to build. H.D. portrays the Chthonic Pantheon as the precursor to the Olympic Pantheon, suggesting that it was erased, much like the older work in a palimpsestic document, to make room for a modern interpretation of Greek religious figures. H.D. both revisits already powerful female figures in mythological history and reintroduces them in a modern context, and also presents already familiar female goddesses and reshapes their constructs using experimentation with form so that their role in a modern mythological context is restructured.

One of the tactics H.D. uses within the terrain of feminist revisionist mythology is to give mythological female figures a voice when they are lacking one in the original myth. In her poem “Eurydice,” H.D. places emphasis on Eurydice’s voice through assonance, varying line lengths, enjambment, stop consonants, and other phonetic and formal devices that encourage the reader to notice the forceful quality of Eurydice’s words. The authoritative first person voice carries throughout the poem, addressing an unnamed “you” — presumably Orpheus — whom she blames for her devaluation and suppression. The poem begins with an attack on Orpheus’ character, blaming him for her resignation to the underworld: “so for your arrogance/ and your ruthlessness/ I am swept back/ where dead lichens drip/ dead cinders upon moss of ash;/ so for your arrogance/ I am broken at last,/ I who lived unconscious,/ who was almost forgot;” (H.D. 6-
This repetition of the phrase “so for your arrogance” works in direct contrast with the repetition of the phrase “You are useless” in “The Shrine.” This blaming statement is a reversal of the attack on the sea deity in “The Shrine,” where H.D. uses the repeated phrase to show the effects of patriarchal ideologies. Here, the rhetoric vilifies the man and creates sympathy for the subjugation of the woman.

After establishing Eurydice’s unhesitant and declarative stance, H.D. then uses phonetic devices and experiments with line breaks in order to highlight the character of her voice. In her book, *Modernism’s Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance*, Carrie J. Preston suggests that these phonetic devices allow the reader to focus on the auditory aspects of language and how power can be conveyed through seemingly simple manipulations of sound: “In these lines about speech, stressed assonance (should, you, you, would, your) and successive d-t and t-p plosives (should tell, would turn, fit paths) direct attention to Eurydice’s voice and the aural qualities of language” (Preston 202). In the stanza that Preston refers to here, Eurydice convinces Orpheus, and her reader, that hell is no worse than life on earth: “and the flowers,/ if I should tell you,/ you would turn from your own fit paths/ toward hell,/ turn again and glance back/ and I would sink into a place/ even more terrible than this” (H.D. 118-24). Through her powerful rhetoric, Eurydice is able to convince both Orpheus and her reader that the flowers in hell are more beautiful on earth, and that because she is there, hell is a better place to live. The varying line lengths and use of enjambment throughout the poem also places emphasis on certain words and phrases, carrying a tone of drama, power, and conviction in her voice. Despite the authority Eurydice’s voice wields, Preston clarifies that H.D. still shows the ways in which women’s voices are constrained by a patriarchal society by placing Eurydice in the Underworld rather than on Earth, where women’s voices have no power:
‘Eurydice,’ one of H.D.’s most famous dramatic monologues, revises the familiar myth by providing the female character’s perspective, a project common in H.D.’s mythic monologues. ‘Eurydice’ implies that death is the only way for a woman ensnared in the culture of beauty worship to achieve a voice not dominated by her body; that is, she must speak from the grave. (Preston 201)

Like Dickinson and Stein, H.D.’s feminist claims and discussions of gender and sexuality often materialize by revealing the inadequacies of the system rather than presenting an idealized version without these issues. In “Eurydice,” H.D. manages to simultaneously give the female mythological character a voice by revising the myth from Eurydice’s perspective, while still showing that within her male-dominated society, this voice does not carry any weight, as Eurydice’s voice is only impactful from beyond the grave. H.D. emphasizes the importance of the separation of a woman’s mind and body through feminist revisionist mythology, and shows that the only way for a woman’s voice to be heard is to place importance on a woman’s mind rather than her beauty. H.D. challenges the image of the female muse in mythology by giving her a voice rather than a living corporeal form, thus separating women’s minds and bodies through feminist revisionist mythology.

Rewriting the Femme Fatale from a Modern, Feminist Perspective

The palimpsestic nature of H.D.’s work spans beyond her integration of mythic materials with modern form. H.D.’s work responds to the ideals of Victorian language and literature in ways that deviate from her male contemporaries. In her book *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence*, Cassandra Laity argues that unlike her modernist male contemporaries, H.D. integrates elements from British literary tradition at the end of the 19th
century and refurbishes them in order to support her own ideals: “H.D. eluded the male modernist flight from Romantic ‘effeminacy’ and ‘personality’ by embracing the very cults of personality in the British fin de siècle that her contemporaries most deplored: the cult of the demonic femme fatale and that of the Aesthete androgyne” (Laity ix). By deviating from her male contemporaries in her use of Victorian elements, H.D. sets out to create the female version of modernism – one that embraces female sexuality by presenting the femme fatale as in control of her body and the power that it yields. This reworking of definitions of female sexuality resonates with Stein’s attempts to reclaim the female body and female sexuality through her experimentation with form. Unlike Stein, however, H.D. builds upon older literary traditions instead of writing them off as being unable to convey more progressive ideologies about femininity and sexuality. Where Stein strips words of their meaning, H.D. reclaims meanings she believes have been obscured by societal norms through a palimpsestic structure in which she overlays older traditions with newer ideologies.

One of H.D.’s most obvious reclamations of the femme fatale is in her portrayal of Helen of Troy in *Helen in Egypt*. Helen of Troy serves as a classic embodiment of the femme fatale archetype; however, in most mythological depictions, she is a static character with no voice and no control over her own power. In *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.*, Polina Mackay asserts that H.D.’s interpretation of Helen revises this traditional portrayal:

H.D. reshapes Euripides’ *Helen* partly from Helen of Troy’s perspective and thus illuminates the role of woman in the epic story of male heroes and legends. H.D. writes directly against Homer by placing Helen not in Troy but in Egypt. This is the first indication of H.D.’s intention to challenge epic tradition. Since this genre is that which is mostly associated with male writing, Helen in Egypt counteracts
classic male-authored literature and its tendency to either ignore or deliberately silence women. (Mackay 60)

By giving Helen of Troy a voice and telling the story from her perspective while simultaneously maintaining her sexual nature, H.D. presents Helen with genuine authority through her status as a femme fatale and control over her own sexuality and femininity. As with the earth goddesses, H.D. sees the potential for female authority in literature buried beneath the surface, and uses palimpsestic form to reconstruct this new portrayal of the female characters.

In Helen in Egypt, H.D. establishes female authority through the use of Helen’s first person narrative. This book-length poem presents a scenario where Helen is not actually in Troy as it burns, but instead is whisked away by the gods to Egypt, where she resides while a false figure remains in her place in Troy. Helen describes this figure as “but the phantom and the shadow thrown/ of a reflection” (H.D. 5). Despite the fact that this false figure is essentially a corpse-like rendering of Helen, its impact on the war remains the same, as Helen’s power, traditionally, is derived not from any tangible aspect of her identity but rather, her physical beauty. Helen’s voice resides with her physical body in Egypt, far away from the war occurring as a result of the sexualization of her body. The double-voiced quality of the poem resonates with the double-voiced structure of palimpsestic form. H.D.’s displacement of Helen’s voice across two separate worlds is similar to the merging of different voices from different worlds within one poem. The juxtaposition of these distinct portrayals of Helen emphasizes the dislodgment of woman’s voice from her physical form.

Helen retells the story of the Trojan War from her perspective in the first person voice, questioning the assignment of blame on herself for the war and speaking to the unjustness of the portrayal of her identity as linked exclusively to her physical form. Book One begins with Helen
emerging from a dream-like state and recalling the injustices that have been committed against her: “I am not nor mean to be/ the Daemon they made of me;/ going forward, my will was the wind,/ … and I am tired of the memory of battle,/ … let them sing Helena for a thousand years,/ let them name and re-name Helen,/ I can not endure the weight of eternity” (H.D. 109-10). Here, Helen establishes her disconnection to this “Daemon” figure that society has turned her into by viewing her as an object rather than a woman, the same ghost that stands in her place on the walls of Troy while she is in Egypt.

Helen is only able to have a voice in society by separating herself from this “Daemon” figure. Much like in “Eurydice,” where Eurydice must be dead for her voice to be heard, here Helen’s identity must be split into two beings – a ghost of herself that society worships, and her corporeal self that contains her spirit and voice – in order for her to have a voice. Through both of these impossible circumstances, H.D. illuminates the lengths to which women must go in order for their voices to be heard in society. By giving Helen a voice and allowing that voice to exist separately from her veneration as a symbol of sexual status, H.D. simultaneously creates a narrative of female authority and shows why such narratives are often stifled by restrictive societies.

H.D. reclaims Helen’s control over her own influence by shifting conventionally gendered constructions of visual perspective in the subject and object of sentences to reimagine the locus of control within the tradition of the femme fatale. In her book, *Embodying Beauty: Twentieth-Century American Women Writers’ Aesthetics*, Malin Pereira suggests that H.D. subverts traditional gendered sentence structures that reinforce the ideology of the male gaze:

H.D. deliberately evokes subject-object distinctions to reveal and critique their construction and that Helen is positioned as an object of desire for those purposes
as well. In repeated scenes of gazing, the male figures in *Helen in Egypt* look at Helen as an object. In these scenes of beauty, H.D. critiques the visual perspectivism inherent in woman’s position by shifting Helen from object to subject. (Pereira 33-4)

H.D. revises the conventional sentence construction, in which woman is the object and man is the subject doing the gazing, so that power dynamics within the sentence are no longer determined by the relation between subject and object but rather by the nature of those characters’ exchanges. Pereira points to a scene where Achilles turns to look at Helen as an example of this phenomenon: “I could not see her eyes/ across the field of battle,/ I could not see their light/ shimmering as light on the changeable sea?/ all things would change but never/ the glance she exchanged with me” (H.D. 54). The description of a light in Helen’s eyes that shimmers “as a light on the changeable sea” indicates the recognition of Helen as a subject rather than an object who is capable of seeing and perceiving many things. Their exchange here is a reciprocal glance, in which the subject of the sentence is switched to Helen in the final line, “the glance she exchanged with me.” Pereira asserts that this scene “illustrates H.D.’s deliberate representation of Achilles and Helen as initially subject and object, respectively, in order to critique visual perspectivism and revise it into a new vision ‘shimmering as light on the changeable sea’” (Pereira 35). H.D. presents both the traditional sentence structure of woman as the object of the male subject’s gaze and also a revised version in which Helen gains more autonomy. By juxtaposing these differing uses of subject and object within the same stanza, H.D. highlights one of the innumerable ways in which language upholds the values of a patriarchal and sexist society even within simple sentence structures.
Although H.D. takes the cult of the femme fatale from Victorian literature, there are other Romantic elements that she discards. The notion of ornamental language is one such element that H.D. avoids in her experimentation with form. In a letter to Harriet Monroe from October 1912, Ezra Pound writes that H.D.’s writing isn’t overly expressive in its language:

I’ve had luck again, and am sending you some modern stuff by an American, I say modern, for it is in the laconic speech of the Imagistes, even if the subject is classic. … This is the sort of American stuff that I can show here and in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won’t permit examination. It’s straight talk, straight as the Greek! (Pound 11)

This excessiveness of language that Pound refers to, especially in relation to adjectives and certain types of metaphors, is characteristic of ornamental Victorian language. H.D. consciously avoids this highly emotional and descriptive language in her writing. The social views conveyed through this type of language are usually Christian, upper class, and heteronormative, and male. H.D., like her male modernist contemporaries, predominantly shies away from Victorian language for this reason. In her reinterpretation of the femme fatale, however, she sheds these social perceptions, and instead forms a new tradition of female empowerment.

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Inscribed on her tombstone in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania are the last two stanzas of H.D.’s poem “Epitaph”:

so you may say,

“Greek flower; Greek ecstasy
reclaims for ever
one who died

following

intricate song’s lost measure.” (H.D. 7-12)

The first stanza of the poem is self-reflective, referring to the speaker’s own distorted perception of herself. The second stanza addresses the speaker’s critics, suggesting that even after her death they will continue to condemn certain aspects of her work. These last stanzas, however, refer to the poetry itself, and the way that the speaker will live on through it even after her death. These lines succinctly convey the epitome of H.D.’s idea of the palimpsest: that through literature, the most truthful expressions of human experience can be conveyed, and that by internalizing and revitalizing older literature and integrating it with the new, those individual experiences can never be fully extinguished.
Conclusion

A final way to view the threads that tie these three poets to one another is to consider their shared impact on later female experimental writers. The avant-garde literary canon of American female poets is composed primarily of contemporary poets such as Mina Loy, Lyn Hejinian, Kathy Acker, Susan Howe, Sonia Sanchez, and Harryette Mullen. Earlier poets such as Gertrude Stein are considered to be the founders of this literary movement, and contemporary female experimental poets are often discussed in regard to how they mimicked or deviated from the style of such founding “mothers”. Emily Dickinson, however, is not traditionally grouped within this literary canon, despite the fact that her poetry serves as one of the earliest examples of women experimenting with form and creating their own system of linguistics. Perhaps this is due to the fact that there are very few records of Dickinson speaking about her work and the ways in which she experiments with form, unlike other women in the canon who published many articles discussing the art of avant-garde poetry. Or perhaps it is because her experimentation with form is so radically different from that of those who came after her. Regardless of her presence in the literary canon, Dickinson’s influence on successive generations can be seen in the work of many contemporary female experimental writers.

In his book, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*, Thomas Gardner interviews contemporary authors whose work he believes was influenced by Emily Dickinson. The title of Gardner’s book (pulled from one of Dickinson’s well-known lines) is aptly titled, as in many ways, Emily Dickinson’s experimentation with form opened doors for future women writers to also write in ways that defy traditional constructions of literary form. Not all the
contemporary writers that he interviews are poets; in his first interview, he talks to Marilynne Robinson about the ways in which Dickinson influenced her novel *Housekeeping*.

Robinson alludes to specific poems that she is struck by and that she believes influence her writing, but she also illuminates specific aspects of Dickinson’s poetry that have inspired her own writing style. When she discusses a specific tool from Dickinson’s wheelhouse that she believes she implements, Robinson speaks to Dickinson’s individualistic approach to art, and how rather than implementing established cultural conventions to her work, she allows for an individualistic approach, where allusions are derived from individual interpretations rather than cultural interpretations:

> I’ve said before that when I wrote *Housekeeping* I tried not to make allusions that Ruth couldn’t make. I think that that was something Dickinsonian in my mind, the declaration of the fact that art, which is actually composed experience, composed perception, is not something that you learn like a trade, but actually has its essence, its basic origins, in individual experience. (Robinson 54)

The character Ruth that she mentions is one of two child protagonists in the novel, both of whom are somewhat isolated from the rest of the world. When Robinson speaks to this idea of trying not to make allusions that Ruth couldn’t make, she is talking about the idea that many authors impose allusions on characters that are not based on the individual experiences of those characters, but rather societal norms. She recognizes the way in which Dickinson strives to break free from these allusions that she would deem false, as they are built on cultural models rather than individual experiences.

Robinson also cites Dickinson’s construction of female autonomy in her poetry as being one of the greatest ways that she is influenced by Dickinson: “Her great impact on me was the
fact of her building such a complete autonomy out of her self and her circumscribed life” (Robinson 54). The Dickinson that many contemporary writers engage with is the Dickinson that sought to break boundaries placed on female writers at the time, and in the process, to build a sentiment of female empowerment. Robinson suggests that this establishment of autonomy simultaneously works to convey a sense of truth in writing: “Apparently, she’s been criticized for not quoting, not alluding, but in a way what she’s doing is developing a kind of complete autonomy. I don’t know why it has such meaning for me, it just seems like some kind of purity and honesty” (Robinson 54). Robinson feels that Dickinson’s endeavor to gain autonomy through her writing is one of the most pure and honest attempts at conveying meaning through literature. Dickinson’s determination to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” seeks both to express her truest self, but also to do it in a way that circumvents societal convention; in doing so, she also achieves a sense of autonomy.

In addition to Marilynne Robinson, Gardner also interviewed contemporary poet Susan Howe, as she is outspoken on the ways in which Dickinson has influenced her writing. In 1985 she published *My Emily Dickinson*, in which she focuses on Dickinson’s “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” in her exploration of Dickinson’s feminist poetics. Like Robinson, Howe discusses the ways that Dickinson has influenced her writing, but the elements that she cites as being most influential to her writing are vastly different.

Howe names Dickinson’s unique aphorisms as one of the aspects of her writing by which she is most influenced: “When it comes to the structure of my sentences and paragraphs, [Emily Dickinson] is my teacher. She is the only woman poet of the nineteenth century I know of who writes memorable aphorisms. Aphorisms are intentional and intuitive at once” (Howe 145). Many of these aphorisms that Howe refers to as being distinctly Dickinsonian are centered on the
art of writing, and seeking truth in writing. One of her poems (F278) is composed entirely of an aphorism: “A word is dead, when it is said/ Some say—/ I say it just begins to live/ That day” (1-4). This aphorism speaks to the dynamicity of Dickinson’s work, and her refusal to accept a certain permanency of the word that comes with the publication of a poem. Another lesser known Dickinsonian aphorism comes from a letter she wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1870. In the letter she includes a list of aphorisms for him, one of which reads, “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can 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 way I know it. Is there any other way” (Fr342a). As Howe suggests, the language that Dickinson uses in her aphorisms is not trite or cliché like many other aphoristic writings. Howe states that she uses these aphorisms as a model for structuring her own sentences and paragraphs. Dickinson’s aphoristic phrases serve as a paradigm for the importance of diction, and of carefully choosing the order of words. In the same letter to Higginson where she describes poetry as lifting one’s head off, she also provides the line, “Truth is so rare that it is delightful to tell it.” (Fr342a) Instead of structuring this sentence so that it reads “I delight in telling the truth, because it is rarely told,” Dickinson places the fact that truth is rare in the dependent clause at the beginning of the sentence, so that one is first instructed that truth is rare, and then after that one learns that Dickinson is one of the rare few that tells the truth, because she delights in undertaking something that is so rare.

Like Dickinson, Stein inspired many modern women writers with her experimentation with form. Herbert A. Leibowitz goes as far to suggest in his book, *Parnassus: Twenty Years of Poetry in Review*, that “we know that virtually all subsequent experimental writing in this country (probably in the English language) has been influenced one way or another by Stein”
One faction of poetry in particular where Stein’s influence can be seen is in the Language poetry movement (alternatively spelled L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E after the literary journal edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein) of the 1960s and 70s. Members of this avant-garde group include female poets such as Leslie Scalpino, Carla Herrman, Hannah Weiner, Lyn Hejinian, Tina Darragh, and Madeline Gins. Marianne DeKoven points to specific aspects of Stein’s experimentation with form as being the most influential for modern day experimental female writers:

Her encoding of lesbian sexual feeling in her experimental work, her undoing of patriarchal portraiture in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the buried anger at female vicimisation in *Three Lives*, and her overall, lifelong commitment to freeing language from the hierarchical grammars of patriarchy have made her profoundly important to contemporary feminist experimental writers. (DeKoven 9)

The influence that these techniques held can be seen within the writing of many of the female Language poets.

One of the primary concentrations of Language poetry is on the relation between language and meaning, as exposed through experimentation with poetic form. Lyn Hejinian, a self-declared member of the Language poetry movement, writes in her introduction to one of her collections of poetry, *The Language of Inquiry*, that for her, “Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation” (Hejinian 1). Hejinian’s explanation of language and its relation to meaning resonates with Stein’s dogmas about language and meaning. The idea of language being
comprised of symbols that convey meaning which subsequently convey an entire larger social perspective is extremely Steinian in nature, and serves as a clear example of a modern female experimental writer retaining Stein’s ideas about language in her writing.

In most cases, the techniques of Stein that modern female writers choose to emulate in their writing are those that allow them to convey feminist ideologies in their work. Hejinian is no exception in this. Another Steinian philosophy that Hejinian replicates in her poetry is the emphasis on “insistence” rather than repetition. In his book, *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature*, Jacob Edmond argues that Hejinian’s poetry emphasizes the distinction between insistence and repetition by offering, “an alternative way to understand recurrence: not as repetition, but as, in Gertrude Stein’s sense, ‘insistence.’ For Hejinian, as for Stein, ‘there is no such thing as repetition.’ Each insistence transforms and is transformed by the form and the context of its presentation; it depends on a poetics” (Edmond 195). Edmond uses the opening lines of Hejinian’s poem, *The Guard*, as an example of Hejinian’s use of insistence. The first two lines of the poem read: “Can one take captives by writing ---/ ‘Humans repeat themselves.’” (Hejinian 1-2). Edmond suggests that Hejinian’s placement of the phrase “Humans repeat themselves” in quotation marks “highlights its status as a repeated phrase—a version of the cliché ‘history repeats.’ In so doing, she transforms a direct statement into an example that simultaneously describes its own repetitiveness” (Edmond 195). This line, when juxtaposed with the preceding line, “Can one take captives by writing ---” provokes a negative association with the idea of subliminal patterns in language. The word “captives” suggests that humans are captives to their own language system (as seen through patterns in writing). This attention to patterns and repetition in language continues throughout the poem, appearing in lines such as, “Such hopes are set, aroused/ against
interruption. Thus ---/ in securing sleep against interpretation” (Hejinian 11-13), which
references society’s reliance on certain expected schemas of language, or “Repetition in copying/
seems to mean to say ‘I, too’’” (Hejinian 31-2), which shows the way that language suggests that
patterns and repetition are the key to human connection. This last line in particular emulates the
clichéd line, “Imitation is a form of flattery,” again pointing out how society has become
accustomed to and dependent on these patterned phrases in language.

Another key element of the Language poetry movement is the emphasis on paratactic
structure. Language poet Leslie Scalapino uses parataxis in her poetry in order to disrupt
conventional uses of language and explore erotic themes. Scalapino eroticizes language in her
poetry by using paratactic structure to juxtapose phrases in unconventional ways and give them
new meaning. In, Floating Series I, for instance, Scalapino uses parataxis to take non-sexual
terms such as “lily pads” and “bud” and eroticize them: “the/ women – not in/ the immediate/
setting/ -- putting the/ lily pads or/ bud of it/ in/ themselves/ a man entering/ after/ having/ come
on her – that/ and/ the memory of putting/ in/ the lily pad or the/ bud of it first,/ made her come”
(Scalapino 1-19). This coded language conveyed through paratactic structure is similar to Stein’s
use of words like “milk” and “eggs” in Tender Buttons to indicate hidden lesbian themes. In her
chapter titled “Style and Power” in Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry’s book, Feminism,
Bakhtin, and the Dialogic, Josephine Donovan explores various reasons why women may be
inclined towards using parataxis. One motive that she suggests is that

in their domestic, use-value production, women did not experience a hierarchical
division of labor; rather, they performed a variety of tasks sequentially, but none
of these tasks held a priority (as opposed to exchange-value production where
intellectual and manual labor are separated with the former held in higher esteem and with labor acutely specialized and repetitive). (Donovan 88)

Parataxis is a language used by the oppressed, to equalize certain concepts made unequal by society. Just as Stein uses this technique to illustrate the patriarchal and heterosexist attitudes of her society, women writers influenced by her use the technique to point out injustices and then insert new forms of language that introduce themes that have otherwise been omitted from literature.

Within the group of Language poets, there is a split between those who focus on highlighting everyday speech, and those who focus on metonymy and synecdoche and other literary devices that exaggerate the paratactic nature of the poem. The first group is clearly influenced by the poetry of William Carlos Williams, while Stein’s poetry influences the latter. While many poets employ both paratactic structures and the use of everyday speech simultaneously, in picking a side, there is typically a pattern where female poets lean towards the paratactic side, and male poets move towards the everyday side. I propose that this pattern is due to the influencer of that side rather than any predisposition of men or women to favor parataxis or everyday speech. Modern female poets who choose to write in a paratactic style, or otherwise imitate Steinian technique, are electing to use a style that enables them to convey anti-patriarchal or otherwise unconventional thoughts in their poetry.

Like Stein, H.D.’s poetry was not rediscovered until the 1970s within the context of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets; thus, many of the same women who were influenced by Stein were also influenced by H.D. as well, but in different ways. H.D.’s palimpsestic approach to experimentation with form is one of the key elements that modern writers carry into their own work. Denise Levertov, an American poet writing in the second half of the 20th century in the
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tradition of the Black Mountain poets, was heavily influenced by H.D.’s palimpsestic poetry. Her own experimentation with form mirrors H.D.’s in many ways, especially in her later works of poetry and prose. In her book, *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement*, Audrey T. Rodgers writes that in Levertov’s collection of poetry, *The Jacob’s Ladder*, “The forms are freer, the verse more experimental, the language a mélange of allusion—mythic and classical—and the American idiom” (Rodgers 70). This same sentence could be used to describe H.D.’s later works of poetry; the reference to mythic and the classical allusions makes the connection between the two poets especially apparent.

One of the poems from this collection in which the influence of H.D.’s palimpsestic form is evident is “Three Meditations,” which incorporates language from influential writers in order to mediate between the past and the present. Each section opens with a citation from a writer that sets up the structure for that stanza. The first section begins with a quote from the poet Charles Olson about social action in poetry: “the only object is a man, carved out of himself, so wrought/he fills his given space, makes traceries sufficient to/others’ needs/ (here is social action, for the poet, anyway, his/politics, his news)” (Levertov 1-5). The ensuing stanza then places this quote about social action into context within a poem, using verbs such as “Breathe,” “Live,” and “Stand fast” to portray the type of social consciousness that Olson is referring to in this quote. The poem itself, stylistically, deviates greatly from Olson’s work, however, with short lines and phrases such as, “Live/ in thy fingertips and in thy/ hair’s rising; hunger/ be thine, food/ be thine and what wine/ will not shrivel thee” (Levertov 19-24), rather than the longer lines and phrases that characterize Olson’s work. This act of simulation but while directly citing specific lines from the writer as her source is redolent of H.D.’s ideas about translation being an interpretation.
rather than a direct rendition. Levertov evokes Olson’s ideas by making them her own, while still recognizing the importance of his work to her own poetry.

In the second section, Levertov cites the voice of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, with the epigraph, “The task of the poet is to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions” (Levertov 30-1). As in the first section, she then interprets this quote within the following lines, by invoking the idea of the temporal and the eternal through reference to an attack on Rome, “Barbarians/ throng the straight roads of/ my empire, converging/ on black Rome” (Levertov 33-6), and an allusion to a historical battlefield, “I angel, I you, you/ world, battlefield, stirring/ with unheard litanies, sounds of piercing/ green half-smothered by/ strewn bones” (Levertov 50-4). The palimpsestic nature of this section is highlighted not only by the juxtaposition of Ibsen’s ideologies with her own stylistic interpretation, but also by the references to ancient scenes of barbarians invading Rome and bone-strewn battlefields. Like H.D.’s poetry, this poem both looks backward to the influence of these writers and to historical scenes, but also looks forward to her own interpretation of these ideas about social action and responsibility.

In the epigraph to the third section, Levertov quotes D. H. Lawrence on the role of virtue: “And virtue? Virtue lies in the heroic response to the creative/ wonder, the utmost response” (Levertov 55-6). Levertov then interprets this idea about the heroic being a “response to the creative wonder” by presenting the poet as having the power to be virtuous through song: “bringing the poet/ back to song/ as before/ to sing of death/ as before/ and life, while he/ has it, energy/ … to be/ what he is/ being his virtue/ filling his whole space/ so no devil/ may enter” (Levertov 71-90). The poet here is brought back from death through his own song, just as in this section, D. H. Lawrence’s ideas about heroic virtue are brought back through reinterpretation.
Like H.D., Levertov employs a palimpsestic structure in this poem by weaving key influences throughout the body of the text, but showing how she deviates from these original influences in ways that are new and experimental.

Denise Levertov explicitly cites H.D. as one of her influences by writing a memorial poem to her titled “September 1961,” the month of H.D.’s death after suffering a stroke. Although the poem also recognizes the influence of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, the title of the poem, as well as the overall structure, shows the impact that H.D. had on Levertov’s poetry. The poem begins with the lines, “This is the year the old ones,/ the old great ones/ leave us alone on the road” (Levertov 1-3). The third person “us” in this poem, the speaker, represents the poets left alone after the passing of these poets who were so influential to their work. The speakers of the poem are voiced through a collective “we” voice, much like the third person “we” of the female chorus that H.D. uses in her poetry. This “we” voice shows how the influences of Pound and Williams and H.D. are all still there, speaking through this poem like modernist muses. It also shows the influence that these poets have on successive generations, as their “we” transforms into the “we” of a future generation of writers inspired by their work. The speaker mentions a language left behind by these poets: “They have told us/ the road leads to the sea,/ and given/ the language into our hands” (Levertov 22-5). This reference to a new form of language, as well as the road leading to the sea, pays homage to H.D. and her experimentation with language and literature, as well as her original fascination with the sea and the female deities that rule over it. The poem ends with this same image with the lines, “we think the night wind carries/ a smell of the sea…” (Levertov 44-5), instilling the idea of the legacy that H.D.’s work held not only for her own poetry, but also how this legacy will carry over into successive generations.
The threads of influence from these three poets can be seen in almost every modern female American experimental writer. Yet somehow, despite the significance of these women within the canon of formal experimental female American writers, they are rarely grouped together or discussed in relation to one another. Whether consciously or not, literary critics and scholars effectively dislodge this canon, or prevent it from coming together, by separating these women and placing them either in discussion with other men or isolating them completely from literary canonization. Throughout history, literary and otherwise, radical female figures are often isolated in order to reduce the power of their words. A collective voice is more powerful than one solitary voice – as H.D. shows through the authority of the female chorus. Therefore, to place these women together in one literary canon, to give them the title of “foremothers,” bolsters their own authority as female writers by illuminating a pattern of radical thought rather than one solitary instance. By refusing to view these women as anomalies, a rich history of women’s voices in formal experimental literature is revealed as a source for contemporary women writers.

This canon of formal experimental female American poets opens doors for other predominantly female canons to emerge. Though comprised of predominantly white, middle to upper-class poets who discuss issues of intersectionality only within the context of their gender and sexuality, other marginalized narratives can emerge as a result of this canon, such as Harryette Mullen’s shaping of an African-American female experimental poetic tradition. The voices of Dickinson, Stein, and H.D. cannot fully represent the population of American female poets; however, they can begin to promote discussions of the limitations of traditional linguistic and literary structures in depicting non-heterocentric and feminist ideologies. Their endeavors to
alter language and literature to make it more accepting for marginalized groups of people are also imperfect. Each poet furthers the work of the poet before her in pushing the boundaries of language and literature. By acknowledging the significance of this canon and encouraging discussions about the limitations of traditional linguistic and literary structures, their role as innovators of language and literature is carried into contemporary scholarly conversation.

Each of these three poets overcame significant opposition in their attempts to write poetry that deviated from social conventions and literary standards during that point in history. Poetry was considered to be largely a male genre during their lifetimes, and so they met opposition not only in writing experimental literature, but specifically in writing experimental poetry. In Dickinson’s poem, “They shut me up in Prose—” (F445), she portrays a female speaker who, like herself, was told she should not express herself through poetry.

They shut me up in Prose—

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet—

Because they liked me “still”—

Still! Could themself have peeped—

And seen my Brain—go round—

They might as wise have lodged a Bird

For Treason—in the Pound—

Himself has but to will

And easy as a Star
Look down opon Captivity—

And laugh—No more have I— (Dickinson 1-12)

The “they” in the first line is society, which tries to shut the speaker up in “Prose.” The idea that Dickinson uses “Prose” as a place of confinement illustrates the ways in which she, as a woman, is expected by society to write in prose instead of the male-dominated form of poetry. The speaker compares this instance in her adult life where society is confining her ability to express herself to a similar type of oppression she faced in her childhood when she was suppressed by being told to be “still.” In the second stanza, the speaker suggests that had this society known her capabilities, they would have realized the futility of their attempts to confine her intellect and innovative voice to one constrictive form, affirming that had they been able to see her “Brain—go round—,” they would have known it would be as impossible to confine her as it would be to lodge “a Bird/ For Treason—in the Pound—.” In the final stanza, the speaker laughs at her oppressors, for if they would just “Look down opon Captivity—,” they would realize that they had failed to restrain her, and that she had used their efforts to control her to attain her freedom. Since this poem exists, Dickinson shows that she has escaped this societal form of restriction. By trying to inhibit her ability to express herself, society freed her, as she was inspired by their subjugation to write this poem, and other poems, through which she is able to unreservedly express her ideas and her identity. This idea of taking examples of oppression and translating them into depictions of autonomy can be seen in the experimentation with form of all three poets. By using the same bars that confine them to set themselves free, Dickinson, Stein, and H.D. establish a model for other women to use to liberate themselves, and illustrate how they can use their voices to gain autonomy in a world that tells them they have none.


