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**A Body of One's Own:
Representations of Women's Bodies in the Poetry of
Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton,
and Breaking Free of the Gendering Patriarchy**

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Abstract

Waxing, shaving, plucking, eye-brow tinting, hair dying, makeup, diets, plastic surgery – if all women were instantaneously in love with their natural bodies, millions of people would be out of work. For centuries, women's bodies have been sites of patriarchal control: are they too fat, too thin, too loud, too quiet, too modest, too revealing, too innocent, too experienced? The list of dichotomous expectations goes on for miles, but what remains most important is that women act like women, look like women, and are attractive to men. Unfortunately, what it means to be a woman has not been democratically chosen by women – the Western patriarchal power structure has dictated expectations of gender for centuries, and is showing no sign of ceasing. This thesis looks at the representations of women's bodies, specifically the breast, hands and mouth in the poems of Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton. Through body-focused language and metaphor, the narrators of the poems illustrate the extreme and debilitating nature of patriarchal control. The reader sees the effects of this control on the bodies and lives of multiple women. Breasts are commodified, idealised and turned into sites of fragmentation, hands are cut-off and stripped of power, and mouths are punished if they attempt to question or raise their voices. The work of several theorists, and viewing the poetry through a feminist Foucauldian lens, reveals the extent to which women's bodies are focused on, criticised and controlled. Dickinson's and Sexton's narrators do offer some light: it is not all doom and gloom. They show that through the narratives of those the patriarchy oppresses, a conversation can begin, a call to rebellion can be sounded, and that even if people are too weak, they can still undermine and subvert power until their voices and bodies are heard – until they can be unshackled

from the enforced gender binary the patriarchy uses to control and punish those who are not conformist, white, able, cisgender men. A creative component in the form of a poetry collection, *We Wash Our Hands in Fire*, is also included in this thesis. The creative work explores many of the themes addressed in the thesis; it seeks to further understand Dickinson's and Sexton's poetry by using a poetic medium and lens, and exploring forms similar to those of the two poets. The poetry is also intended to add another voice to the body-focused, rebellious chorus highlighting patriarchal control and challenging it.

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Introduction

“The body is not an apology.

Do not give the body as communion, confession,

do not ask for it to be pardoned as criminal.

The body is not a crime, is not a gun.

The body is not crime, is not sentence to be served.

It is not prison, is not pavement, is not prayer.”¹

Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton are two poets whose collections vibrate with intensity and visceral imagery. Their work is saturated with metaphors and images of the female body. This is so prevalent in each of their collections, that a reader could decide they fancied nothing but poems about the female mouth – and voilà, both poets could provide. From bombs in bosoms, to an angry army of teeth, to muslin souls and elastic feet, the body is constantly present and always ripe for interpretation. This thesis will be constructed in a way that capitalises on this wealth of body poetry, and will discuss these poems thematically so that the most can be made of both the body aspects and the poet’s work all at once. Therefore, each chapter will address a different body part, which will be analysed through the various depictions in multiple works by each poet. This thesis also includes a creative component, which takes the form of a poetry collection. The poetry engages with bodily themes and gender issues, which arise in the work of Dickinson and Sexton. Whilst the poems use forms similar to those of the poets, they also experiment with more modern formats and language. They seek to add to the canon of body poetry, written by women who rebel against the patriarchal control

of their bodies. So, rather than copying Dickinson or Sexton, this poetry collection aims to absorb the power and experience of their words, and produce an informed voice to add to the centuries of female voices telling their stories, as well as demanding change.

It is important to note that both poets wrote from time periods where the body “norms” were cisgender female and male. For this reason, much of the language used to analyse the poems in the chapters, will sound quite binary in terms of the female body. This seems the optimal way of unpacking the poems and interrogating their meanings, as so much of their importance, message and significance comes from them being products of their time. There is no intention to exclude or other the narratives or bodies of those outside the rigid and patriarchal binary in which our bodies are located. The crux of this thesis is to illustrate the ways in which the patriarchy oppresses the bodies of those within its power – in this case female bodies – in order to show the damaging effects of prescribed and enforced gendering on many, different bodies.

The poetry of Emily Dickinson stands out for her time period. She was writing when the ‘New Woman’ concept was emerging, and when many women were seeking to have their minds recognised as equal to men’s. Because of this, much literature produced by women around the late nineteenth century had narratives focusing on women’s thoughts and intellect, and not their bodies. This is perfectly logical: for centuries women’s bodies were considered sites of madness and impurity, so to achieve intellectual equality, a separation between women and their bodies was likely to speed along proceedings. Mary Wollstonecraft’s canonical, *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Woman,ⁱ calls for women's minds to be recognised as human minds and thus as equal to male minds. Wollstonecraft wrote, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison."² 'New Woman' literature such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, highlights feminist issues and engages with the focus on the body and disregard of the mind of which Wollstonecraft wrote. The narratives of these stories show women, their minds and intellects being oppressed and not taken seriously, and the tragic and violent results which ensue.

From her poetry, Dickinson appears ahead of even her somewhat radical contemporaries, albeit in an unobtrusive, not obviously incendiary way. She uses bodily metaphors to express the strong emotions of female narrators, which combine the female body and mind in a powerful performance of female self-expression. Rather than using extended abstract and Latinate metaphor to illustrate the complex minds of her narrators, Dickinson expresses emotions and mental concepts, such as joy and suffering, through the human body. "I felt a funeral in my brain" (No. 280), is an example of how incredibly specific, physical and body focused her work is. The narrator feels the incessant "treading" of mourners, lead boots and a service which is a beating drum – all inside her skull.³ So, instead of hearing how sad and uncomfortable the narrator is, Dickinson *shows* the reader the woman's mental state through language which is deeply rooted in the body. In this way, one could imagine that, with a modern

ⁱ The document which fuelled much of the Western suffrage and gender equality movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

vocabulary and the directness which the modern world would allow her, Dickinson would be a peer of Sexton.

Anne Sexton was a poet who took the constrained voice of her female predecessors and tossed it out the window – to put it mildly. Her life was not tidy or idyllic; she suffered abuse as a child, marriage and motherhood were emotionally rocky for her, and she struggled with her mental health throughout her adult life. So – she used her voice, her anger, her sadness, and her experiences – however gritty – and put it all into her poems, poems which are undeniably and bodily female. Alicia Ostriker puts it well, saying Sexton “gives us full helpings of her breasts, her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion...”⁴ In this way, Sexton was also ahead of her time, which becomes very visible after reading several reviews by prominent male reviewers. In his 1963 review of Sexton’s *All My Pretty Ones*, James Dickey accused the poet of dwelling on the “pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as though this made the writing more real”.⁵ This was at the beginning of Sexton’s publishing career, but a 1974 review, eleven years later, attests to the enduring disregard and distaste for female body poetry, with Robert Boyers calling her work, “excessive self-dramatization, even spilling into undertones of self-pity.”⁶

Whilst the poetry of Dickinson and Sexton is temporally separated by around 78 years, and any analysis naturally needs to reflect this, studying their work simultaneously is not a stretch. The consistent presence and poetic emphasis given to the female body, creates clear connections between the poets’ works. Also, the fact that each poet’s work was not entrenched in her contemporaneous gender or literary norms, makes the poetry more available to cross-temporal comparisons. We see Dickinson’s

expressing abstract emotions through bodily, physical details, and this is mirrored in Sexton's writing. Just because she wrote loudly on subjects deemed 'common' and 'vulgar', does not mean Sexton lacked nuance and emotion. In her poem "Rapunzel", Sexton wrote, "Put your pale arms around my neck. / Let me hold your heart like a flower".⁷ These lines are not dissimilar to a Dickinson poem; they illustrate Sexton's ability to write pieces which are saturated in strong bodily detail, but also show deeper feelings and intangibilities. The common language of bodies bridges the temporal gap and allows each poet to be represented faithfully and their work analysed alongside each other's fairly. Sexton naturally uses more contemporary style and linguistics, which can aid the reading of her metaphor, but Dickinson was not writing so long ago that her language is impenetrable. Dickinson's language is actually a great clue to the reader. Her linguistic style, grammar and word choices are all used very carefully, and they transmit ideas and meanings which are not evident under a cursory inspection of her poetry.

The area of Dickinson's language is where certain scholars have been invaluable to the readings undertaken in this thesis. Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* provides an excellent base for understanding Dickinson's work and language in the nineteenth century scene of "patriarchal poetry".⁸ Gilbert and Gubar discuss how historic female writer's work has formed a "complex, sometimes conspiratorial, sometimes convivial conversation that crossed national as well as temporal boundaries".⁹ They show Dickinson's poetry as rebellious, and as speaking truth to power across time. There is wide-ranging and extensive Dickinson scholarship, but as the following chapters will discuss, much of it becomes problematic due to its

unsubstantiated intrusion into the poet's personal life, and the voyeuristic streak it so often exhibits. So, for this work, the writings of Gilbert and Gubar, Paula Bennett and Adrienne Rich have been among the most important. These writers focus on 'female language', the social and literary context of Dickinson's poems and reveal the ways in which Dickinson's words and narrators flout patriarchal roles and beliefs. Rich says, "It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry",¹⁰ and through the language and points these scholars highlight, these explosions in Dickinson's work are made clearer and more comprehensible.

Through focusing on the narratives revealed by the female narrators and their bodies, this thesis seeks to show the 'conversation' Gilbert and Gubar refer to, and in its creative section, seeks to join in. The experiences of the poets and their female narrators speak through the breasts, hands and mouths discussed in these chapters. They spread their story across the page – just waiting for others to see and take part in the conversation. Thus, writing from women about women's writing is of immense value when analysing the poems in this thesis. Rich, Camille Paglia, Dianne Middlebook, Marilyn Yalom, Caroline Hall, Zofia Burr and Elaine Showalter provide a wealth of knowledge and perspective on the two poets and women's writing in general. Their discussions of female writers and female writing bridge the gap between Dickinson and Sexton. The insight from these writers shows Dickinson's writing as more than the pretty words of a quiet, virginal girl whose life consisted of praying and lamenting over unrequited, heterosexual love. Likewise, they show how Sexton's poems are not just the vulgar expressions of a bored housewife who enjoys making

men uncomfortable. These scholars highlight the patriarchal constraints felt by the female poets, and show the judgements which are placed upon the biological, bodily expressions of their narrators.

The narrators of these poems feel everything with their bodies: their hands are amputated through loneliness, their lips are stained by the kisses of ex-lovers, their unimpressed breasts are acorn skin, and the restraining arms of the patriarchy are constantly breaking, choking and holding back their bodies. The work of several theorists is necessary to illuminate and structure the way through the wealth and intricacies of bodily detail. Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, Sylvia Blood and Iris Marion Young all provide feminist, body-based frameworks which are invaluable. The feminist, Foucauldian readings of power and the body provided by the first three, highlight the control being exerted on multiple aspects of the female body – which is particularly helpful given the format of this thesis. These theorists provide an acute lens through which to view the bodies which emerge from these poems. Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, illustrates what Dickinson's generation of radical women were rebelling against: that, for many years, Western culture has gendered the body female and the mind male. Bordo then highlights the unfortunate results of this gendered separation, saying "for if, whatever the historical context...*the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be".¹¹ Thus women are portrayed as baser forms of human, next to men. Their bodies become the basis for judgement, eclipsing their minds, emotions and personalities. Bordo, Bartky and Blood address these centuries-long attitudes and bring them into the twentieth century, viewing them through several of Foucault's theories. Bartky in

particular, looks at the control devices of the patriarchy. She shows how the many industries and groups criticising women's bodies serve to monitor and prescribe, and thus turn women's bodies into Foucault's "docile bodies".¹² The theorists show how patriarchal control methods become internalised, and women self-police: they "engage in self-surveillance and work hard at disciplining and normalising their own bodies and selves".¹³

Along with the invaluable critical theory, these four scholars demonstrate that the gendered female body is still a centre of patriarchal control. They show that much of the suffering of being a woman, comes from being equated with a body whose socially acceptable actions and public perception are not set or controlled by the minds in those bodies. The body is the place attacked, constrained, prescribed by the patriarchal power structure. So, if we take this idea from them, that we women are our bodies, then perhaps our bodies become the prime places from which to fight back.

This thesis looks at how Dickinson's and Sexton's female narrators use their bodies to show both the depth and extent of patriarchal body control, and to fight back against the oppressive structure. The poetry of Dickinson and Sexton shows us the narratives of the women within those oppressed bodies. We see the pain, the struggle, the hopefulness, the wistfulness, the whimsy and the despair. Through bodily detail, the poetry illuminates methods of patriarchal control, and shows the effects of this control on the bodies and minds of female human beings. Through language which is visceral and physical, the two poets make a reader feel what the narrator is feeling, and see what she is seeing. In many of the pieces discussed, the characters use their bodies to try and break free from their patriarchal confines. These expressions of rebellion and

fight form a chorus which reaches out from the page and joins the narratives of women in the real world. A connection is formed, between the readers, the narrators and the poets who created them, all voices coming together in the fight for female body autonomy, and an end to the enforced gendering of the patriarchal structure which created all this mess.

¹ Sonya Renee, 'The Body is not an Apology' <<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/about-tbinaa/the-body-is-not-an-apology>> [accessed 1 October 2019].

² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. by Eileen Hunt Botting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 70.

³ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1970). All references to Emily Dickinson's poems come from Thomas H. Johnson's complete collection (other than "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection"), originally published in 1960 with Dickinson's original syntax. This thesis also uses his reference numbers. Therefore, all reference to specific poems will refer to Johnson's number and include the line numbers in brackets.

⁴ Alicia Ostriker, 'That Story: Anne Sexton and Her Transformations', *The American Poetry Review*, 11.4 (1982), 11–16 (p. 11).

⁵ Paula M. Salvio, *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 36.

⁶ Robert Boyers, *Contemporary Poetry in America: Essays and Interviews* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 207.

⁷ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 244.

⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. by Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 226.

⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. xxi.

¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 99-121 (p. 103).

¹¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 135.

¹³ Angela Tretheway, 'Disciplined Bodies: Women's Embodied Identities at Work', *Organization Studies*, 20.8 (1999), 423-450 (p. 446).

The Breast

**“Our bodies, no less than anything else that is
human, are constituted by culture.”¹**

The female breast and its representations have always been at the centre of debates about female bodies and feminine identity.¹ From the Venus of Willendorf to Marie Antoinette to Pamela Anderson, the breast has been a constant cultural focus buzzing with connotation; thus Marilyn Yalom author of *A History of the Breast*, calls the breast a “defining part of the female body”.² In the Western world it is a body part whose signification is constantly changing but whose relevance is constant. Susan Bordo writes that “female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in [...] cultural manipulation” and that the “ideal of femininity” is “ever-changing, homogenizing [and] elusive”.³ Expectations regarding the appearance and treatment of the female breast can change on a social whim, as Michel Foucault writes: the body is always “in the grip” of cultural systems.⁴ This makes the female breast a clear site of patriarchal control; an ideal is established but is elusive and subject to cultural whim. Women are socially pressured to fit this breast ideal, one which symbolises their femininity and womanhood, which could change at any point, and in this way the power structure continues to control female bodies. So

¹ This chapter is discussing the female breast in terms of cisgender women as this was the gender identity of the poets being studied. It also uses predominantly cis terminology as it is the language the patriarchy uses to other and oppress “outsiders”, which will be discussed.

the breast remains culturally relevant, whilst undergoing constant social manipulation to alter its appearance and perception.

With the breast so significant to perceptions of the female body, it is not surprising that it features prominently in the works of Dickinson and Sexton. Each poet considers the subject from a range of angles: she expresses the breast as a sexual object, as having a culturally dictated and rigid role, and as belonging to an actual person. Considering the chapter title, it would seem a self-disservice to begin with any other poem than Sexton's "The Breast". The piece opens, "This is the key to it. / This is the key to everything",⁵ Sexton perfectly summing up the significance of the breast in female body poetry and in the life of the body's owner. Something which is particularly exciting about this poem is its coverage; it is not a snapshot into a sex scene where the breast is the sweaty, feverish centre, or a mother nursing her bawling babe, rather it encompasses the breast's journey throughout the narrator's life. The breast is constantly the focus and, at points, the narrative voice itself. In places such as "Something between / my shoulders was there", it is clear the whole body is the narrator, but in moments like "I am alive when your fingers are" and "track me like a climber", the breast itself seems to speak as sole narrator.⁶

The opening of the poem has a kind of ambling jumble of images: there's "picking for dust and bread", "your straw mattress" and "jugful of milk!".⁷ This lack of a clear narrative is in contrast with the rest of the poem, and along with multiple references to children and playing, the beginning gives a sense of childishness. Thus, the beginning of the poem is the birth and infancy of the breast. The "jugful of milk" reinforces this sense of babyhood, along with a foreshadowing of experiences the

narrator's breast can expect later in life. The narrative of the poem naturally falls into three parts; there is the juvenile breast, the adolescent and ultimately that of the woman. Following the early stanzas, Sexton uses the image of a "xylophone" "maybe with skin / stretched over it awkwardly"⁸ and, with such simplicity, captures the image and emotion of a female adolescent. The line gives the reader a view of unrefined angles and ill-fitting skin. The specific word choice itself suggests the skin and outer body struggling to accommodate and fit the naïve but unrelenting inner body, whose unyielding presence is highlighted by the bone-like xylophone. The breast is not directly referred to here but seems implied with the idea of protrusions coming from the pressure of the xylophone, and the awkwardness associated with breast development and pubescence. In this stage the breast seems an inconvenience which is undeniably growing to become something with larger signification, something which will shape the life of the narrator.

With the next line comes the reality of womanhood; the young narrator recounts: "only later did it become something real".⁹ This line heralds the poem's movement towards adulthood and breast/body sexualisation. The narrator measures her size "against movie stars" but finds that she "didn't measure up".¹⁰ Measuring up is the first thing done to the adult female breast, and what is more, it is compared to movie stars – the epitome of objectified and overly sexualised female bodies. From this it appears that, as an object considered essential for femininity and attractiveness, the breast cannot be content, as it will consistently be "never enough".¹¹

The breast and body begin to pine for a young man, one who will sing to them and teach "truth"; the breast laments that her sex "will be transfixed".¹² The next stanza

introduces a lover and the narrating voice seems blurred, in that it could be the breast or the body talking; at this stage it appears as though heterosexual love or appreciation is able to make a fragmented body whole. The narrative voice addresses the lover, whom one assumes is male due to the previous lamentation over needing a man, declaring itself as “your mother, your daughter, / your brand new thing [...] I am alive when your fingers are”.¹³ The most prominent detail here is the progression from male objectification to male possession. The breast is considered a sexual object when compared to the breasts of movie stars, but this stanza is the first time it comes into contact with active sexualisation, and it gives itself to the man as an object to be owned. For the first time in the flow of the poem, there is a sense of stillness; the next three stanzas all focus on the relationship with the male character, where the breast takes a central part. Whereas the narrative had been one of dissatisfaction, with each stanza introducing a new situation or unhappy emotion, the sections with the lover are more content and focused on the liaison. This focus gives the sense that the breast has found new meaning in being the object of affection. The use of “alive” to describe the breast’s feeling when it is being touched by the man somewhat silences the previous stanzas, bringing forward the idea that the breast’s true purpose is to be the centre of male sexual desire. Sexton’s use of the repeated “your”, further pushes this idea the breast has not only found a mate but a master. So, it appears the breast of this poem is both designed for male use as well as ownership, and actually needs the male touch to function – to come alive.

Whilst the breast appears content with its masculine possessor, there are points further on where it appears dissatisfied or as if it is feeling coerced into certain behaviour. The stanza where this change becomes clear reads:

I wear silk – the cover to uncover –
because silk is what I want you to think of.

But I dislike the cloth. It is too stern.¹⁴

Uncovering the breast again highlights its sexual position and again there is more of the willingness to please the man: it will dress itself in something to appear more attractive to him. However, there is certainly another aspect to the stanza: the breast is trying to please, but in doing so is making itself uncomfortable. “Stern” is a word so full of meaning here, as it seems not only to describe the silk but also the requirement to appear soft and appealing. The whole structure around the breast’s relationship here feels strict and rigid, and perhaps something which the breast itself finds too confining and prescriptive. This reading can be taken into the final stanza where the breast says it is “unbalanced” and the lines themselves have a certain quirky and unpredictable air.¹⁵ The narrator says it is mad in the way “young girls are mad, / with an offering, an offering”.¹⁶ The madness of young girls and offerings brings to mind the image of a little girl proffering a posy and a smile, symbolising the need to please and the pleasure in doing so. The madness here is perhaps in what the narrator is willing to offer. The image also implies an innocence, that the breast is not complicit with a prescriptive culture of pretence, superficiality and ownership.

The poem ends on a single line stanza, and as with most Sexton poems which end on a short stanza,ⁱⁱ it is a wonderfully poignant image: “I burn the way money burns.”¹⁷ This line feels almost contradictory: there is the concept of value but also of transience, of preciousness as well as destruction. Money is an abstract concept; there is immense value and socio-cultural beliefs placed upon it, but in the form Sexton is discussing, it is just pieces of coloured paper. Money is something we strive for and are socially encouraged to obtain and hoard, just in the same vein as the female body. This forms a connection between women’s sexuality and capital, implying that the female body can have an objectified price tag – a value which would of course be dictated by those who control the image of the body. Perfect breasts and the ideal female body are considered important and of value, and a woman must diet, exercise and undergo surgery in order to attain them. But just as with pieces of paper, the perfect body is abstract; it does not mean prolonged life or great health, and as female body ideals can change on social and patriarchal whims, there is no security in it. Ultimately the breasts and female body will grow old; they will become decorated with stretch marks and end up ash or earth, just as burnt money is dust in the breeze. The final line is then saying that the breast is something which cannot be separated from the female body and both will die, no matter the narrative or appearance or value placed upon them.

Sexton’s “The Breast” is full of lush, layered imagery and emotion. In overall themes it resonates both with her other works and with those of Dickinson,

ⁱⁱ Such as “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” with the strong and haunting couplet “As for me, I am a watercolor. / I wash off.”

highlighting, questioning and interrogating objectification and the need for a male to give the female body meaning and function. In the beginning, there is a reference to an “architect’s hands” finding the breast, but it is not clear if this is a male or the mother.¹⁸ It does however sow in the mind an image of the breast as an object to be created and handled. It is later, with the fingers bringing the breast to life, that the active and dominant position of the man is solidified. The breast then becomes an object, and what is more, an object whose true meaning and purpose can only be revealed by men, not its own female body; it is something to be given to the man as his “brand new thing” and must conform to fit his idea of desirability.¹⁹

For centuries in the Western world, breasts have been a large part of judging a woman, both morally and sexually, whether they are covered, uncovered, small, large or appear capable of feeding an infant. This kind of emphasis has the effect of equating a woman’s sexuality and personality not only with her appearance but with the appearance of one discrete aspect of her body. In this way, one could say the breast becomes a specific source of fragmentation between body and mind, between appearance and thoughts, feelings and personality. The objectification of a body part which is so culturally loaded, resonates with Sandra Bartky’s arguments on the sexualised female body. She builds on Marx’s theory of worker alienation through a feminist lens, arguing that sexual objectification can result in alienation and thus have a fragmentary effect on the victim.²⁰ Bartky defines sexual objectification as: “when a woman’s sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her”.²¹ This definition certainly speaks to Sexton’s poem. When considering the

emphasis on the sexualised breast and the splitting narrative, “The Breast” appears to come from a place of utmost fragmentation. The fractured narrative voice shows the breast and the body speaking in different voices, about different things, which are affecting the person to whom they are attached. Furthermore, the breast of the poem becomes a wholly sexual object at one point, foregoing any personality to spend its existence dressing up pretty for a man and wanting to be owned by him. There are, however, other moments in the poem which signal it is more complicated; the individuality of the narrative and the final stanzas make it a more three-dimensional piece. Sexton plays with the female objectification, embracing it as well as turning it upside-down and shaking it. Through the strong voice of the breast, the inscrutable and not overly sexual ending, and the confessional mode of the poem, Sexton gives arguably the most objectified part of female anatomy a narrative which shows personality and identity. Sexton seems to embrace male objectification along with body fragmentation, while at the same time showing that the breast and female body are innocent and ignorant of patriarchal meanings and expectations. She injects enormous feeling and emotion into the poem’s narrative, which essentially makes the objectification come full circle, with the object attaining personhood. So if the breast and the body are ways in which a person is going to be judged, then in this piece Sexton has imbued them with enough humanity and mind that they will speak for the woman who owns them.

**“Like every artist, the woman poet is gifted. And her
gift, her creative power, carries with it [...] a
curse.”²²**

Dickinson’s poem, “Rearrange a Wife’s affection!” (No. 1737), addresses female objectification and, in the same way as Sexton, it shows visible fragmentation between the breast and the woman. The fact that the poets are separated by over 70 years but still have this common connection illustrates, as Marina Warner says, that the bodies of women have been “subjected for so long”, but that now their voices are “gaining in volume and pitch and tone”.²³ It also shows that body emphasis and body image manipulation have been a favoured method of the patriarchal power structure when controlling women.ⁱⁱⁱ This first Dickinson poem has no original manuscript; all records which exist are other people’s versions, which means that there is no definitive copy with Dickinson’s own punctuation and line breaks.²⁴ Therefore, my analysis will be conducted on the two-page transcript which was taken from the original in 1889 by Mabel Loomis Todd with the assistance of Harriet Graves, and is the one used by the Dickinson Electronic Archives.²⁵

The poem begins with a roar, the first stanza being resplendent with exclamation marks and an abundance of capital letters: “Rearrange a “Wife’s” affection! / When they dislocate my Brain! / Amputate my freckled Bosom! / Make me bearded like a

ⁱⁱⁱ And of course non-cisgender, disabled, non-white persons.

man!” (1-4).^{iv} The essence of this section revolves around wifehood, with the narrator seeming to say that to remove her wifely affection one would have to dislocate her brain and essentially transform her into a man. On the face of it then, the stanza seems to be addressing the immovability of a wife’s regard and obedience to her husband. Dickinson’s imagery also conveys what is necessary for a woman to be a proper wife, essentially a bosom and a feminine appearance that is in no way reminiscent of a masculine visage. The word bosom could of course be taken many ways, especially considering the time period of the piece, but given that the stanza is addressing removing aspects of a woman to make her less of a wife, it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that she means bosom as in the sense being discussed in this chapter. In this way, the breast becomes something which is at the heart of being a good wife, an essential feature broadcasting femininity and attractiveness, as well as the functionality of being able to nurse a child. If one takes this as true, then it also implies the reverse, in that the breast needs to have a husband in order for it to fully realise its purpose. In short, to have appropriate wifely affection means having breasts and appearing smooth skinned.

The concentration of exclamation marks in the first stanza outdoes the number in the subsequent stanzas and furthermore appears to be more spatially concentrated than in most other Dickinson poems. To me, the abundance of exclamation marks indicates a playful mockery on the part of the narrator, in the sense of ‘surely one would not

^{iv} The version of “Rearrange a “Wife’s” affection!” is taken from the Dickinson Electronic Archives as previously cited, otherwise all Dickinson poems come Thomas Johnson’s cited volume. Henceforth Dickinson’s poems shall just be referenced with an in text citation giving the line of the poem.

stand a chance removing a wife's affection for her husband, one would have a better chance of removing her brain and biological female indicators than meddling with such an integral part of being a good woman and wife'. In my own reading, the first three stanzas play into this idea of mockery and half-truths, then there is a strong shift in the latter half and it feels like the narrator is potentially being more honest – honest in the sense that she's telling us she has a secret which she will not reveal. Most analyses of this poem cite Dickinson's alleged affair with a married man – emotional or physical – and thus the analysts emphasise the strong feelings and pained love, and the presence of a secret is made very literal and autobiographical.²⁶ This reading does not pay overmuch attention to the first stanza, with the dislocation and amputation being seen as "the most extreme tests she [the speaker] can think of to demonstrate her fidelity".²⁷ Whilst this seems a valid reading, it does bring up two points regarding Dickinson studies which I believe need more attention. Firstly, it seems that the need to find out more about this reclusive and clever woman means her poems are read problematically and as biographical, with the male pronouns in them considered to belong to several of the men in her life. Secondly, Dickinson's use of language is far from straightforward, and when regarding her place as a nineteenth century female poet, more consideration should be placed upon her subtle linguistic undercurrents.

Dickinson studies are a vast field, but much of the motivation for analysis seems to come from a somewhat problematic place. The language used in an 1891 review of Dickinson's posthumously released poetry illustrates how the poet was promoted and shows how critical work has often followed the same invasive path. The reviewer notes

multiple times how “Miss Dickinson” was cloistered and not writing for an audience, and concludes by saying:

It is much as if, without her will or knowledge, we were reading, over
this recluse woman’s shoulder, the most intimate thoughts of her strong,
ardent, melancholy soul as they flash nakedly into life at the point of her
pen...²⁸

Now, it seems reasonable to say that an 1891 review of Walt Whitman would be unlikely to include words such as “nakedly” and “intimate” at all, or at least not in the same way they are being used here.²⁹ This captures how much Dickinson scholarship has operated on a voyeuristic streak, the researcher evidently finding satisfaction in prying into the private life of a highly guarded woman. Early in the review, Dickinson is compared to a nun, a not uncommon critical metaphor which just makes it all the more dark. There seems even more pleasure in viewing the private and naked thoughts of a woman if she is chaste and innocent; the reader is given permission and nigh on encouraged to enjoy this feeling of taking advantage. Billy Collins’ clever but potentially problematic poem, “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes” is an example of how this conquerable, virginal, and white-clothed image saturates the public perception of Emily Dickinson. In Collins’ poem, Dickinson is a static figure: she stands motionless whilst he removes her garments. She is the “iceberg” waiting passively to be reached and explored.³⁰

This attitude of ‘spying’ on Dickinson through her poetry has preoccupied many Dickinson scholars. Narrators in poems are linked and then conclusions are drawn about the poet’s own life. Chapters, essays and articles tell us about Dickinson’s

lesbianism, her bisexuality, her troubled family life, her unrequited love and virginity, and her requited love and ensuing affairs. It is natural that we seek to gain any knowledge or details about this great and mysterious poet, but so much of what is sought suggests misogyny, and the way in which it is ‘deduced’ seems to diminish some of her poems. In his Faber and Faber introduction to Dickinson, Ted Hughes writes about her apparent “disappointment in her love for some particular man” and how her later influx of creativity was the “only possible substitute” for her unrequited love.³¹ This piecing together of poems to support a story or belief about the writer is nothing unusual, but the extent to which it occurs with Dickinson regarding her love life is extreme. The conclusions which are drawn, like Hughes’, lack depth, and paint Dickinson as a somewhat simple and lovelorn ‘little woman’, which turn her poems into a confessional crossword puzzle where the reader tries to find lines to feed a new, sensational take on the poet. This search makes many read her poems as autobiography, ignoring subtleties and layered metaphor: as Dickinson herself says, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant” (No. 1129), her own hint that her poems are deep and not straightforward memoir.

Dickinson’s subtle and nuanced use of language and punctuation is a major feature when reading into her works. Many of the assumptions made about her life based on her poems come from trying to match the many pronouns or male presences in her work with figures in her life. It seems this method of research is to discover the ‘juicy’ details about the poet’s life, and thus not enough attention is paid to Dickinson’s linguistic context and methods. In feminist linguistic theories, language has sometimes been termed a ‘patriarchal hand-me-down’, something which is a bit baggy and scuffed,

and not fully suitable for female or frankly non-cisgender white male usage. It was also termed by Rich “the oppressor’s language”, with Rich also drawing particular attention to how it obstructs and interferes with female self-expression.³² When Western female poets in the 19th and 20th century were beginning to use their voices and it was socially allowable to do so, they paid particular attention to language as they were using this male constructed form to “defin[e] a female self” and put their own female emotions and experiences into words.³³ In this way Dickinson’s poems become so much more than a closeted woman writing autobiography, but rather the self-discovery and language reclamation of a female poet in a male dominated world. She uses the language she knows, of marriage and God, to show her own truths and emotions.

Kamilla Denman regards Dickinson’s disruption of the patriarchal social structure as being “primarily linguistic” in nature, and from looking at just one of her poems, the reader can see that the poet’s punctuation and capitalisation are not standard.³⁴ Before the female poet could be an Anne Sexton, writing about abortions and cocks, she could only express her dissatisfaction or heretical thoughts through the destruction of patriarchal language conventionalities as well as creating works which could suggest these feelings without being explicit. Considering the subtleties at play in her poetry, it seems almost brutish the way so many of her male pronouns are taken to mean one man. There must of course be recurring figures in the poems, but so often the narrator is a mythical being or an object, whilst the ‘he’ in the poem is presumed to be a real male figure in her life.^v Adrienne Rich sums up this assumption perfectly,

^v Consider Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”. The ‘he’ in that poem grows to be so much larger than just a father figure – the pronoun comes to embody the ever-present and dominant nature of male power.

saying “it is far too limiting to trace that “He” to some specific lover”, and indeed Dickinson’s ‘he’ could be God, lover, father, brother, oppressor or herself.³⁵ In 1847 Emily Brontë wrote the classic novel *Wuthering Heights*, with a major theme being to show the damage a colonial and “civilising” patriarchal structure can cause. Whilst this can be taken from the plot, we also know it is true because Brontë herself wrote in an essay that these were issues she wanted to write about.³⁶ We cannot know what Dickinson wished to say in her poems, but through paying careful attention to language and analysing her work as separate from that of the male poets of her time, we can perhaps read them as not always being solely about her love life and heartbreaks.

**“Emily Dickinson’s is the only poetry in English by a
woman of that century which pierces so far beyond
the ideology of the “feminine” and the conventions of
womanly feeling.”³⁷**

The specific language used in Dickinson’s “Rearrange a Wife’s affection!”, could be read as a pastiche of the patriarchal culture in which the poet lived. When taken at face value, the poem appears very acceptable and respectable in terms of gender and social norms. This is part of the beauty of the piece - the poem could be a one dimensional embroidery with a meaning and message which suited a superficial viewing. Essentially it is chameleonic in nature, and so, if one chooses to look deeper, Dickinson’s linguistics and punctuation open the door to a multi-faceted and nuanced

creation. As previously discussed, the first half can be read as satire, with Dickinson making a mockery of the expected role of woman and wife, and the second half as being more genuine in message. Her use of exclamation marks supports this reading, and from the opening line to the third stanza which ends on “anodyne”, Dickinson uses six exclamation marks (1-17). Four of the six appear in the first stanza and emphasise the aforementioned notion of femininity and wifeliness being inseparable, as well as the naturalness and necessity of being owned by a husband. The exclamation marks have the effect of highlighting lines which include socially approved female qualities, to the point where they can sound absurd. As such a prominent part of the opening stanza, exclamation marks serve to herald the theme of the poem as being one which includes satire, and the use of punctuation to illustrate and push meaning (without exclamation marks, the first four lines could be read more realistically as genuine belief). As the poem goes on, Dickinson uses words which are evocative, but the language grows to where it hinges on bathos. The use and concentration of more dramatic words toward the middle of the poem fleshes out the idea of Dickinson’s gender mockery, and the exclamation marks accentuate this progression and make it more evident.

The second stanza is filled with words which connote virginity, femininity and pain, following on from the first stanza with more of the qualities of a good woman and wife. Both this and the third stanza are heavy with agony and righteous self-denial. The first word is “blush” which is repeated again within the next line (5-7). Blush implies a multitude of things, with shame, femininity, discomfort and shyness being the most obvious. As an opening verb, it also makes the line an imperative one: “Blush,

my spirit” becomes an order, an instruction to feel feminine shame. This is followed by “fastness” and “unacknowledged Clay” (7-8), which further push female virginity and the notion of the narrator being an ideal woman. “Clay” seems a clear allusion to the creation story, with ideas of construction and moulding humanity; it feels particularly relevant to Eve and her being shaped out of Adam’s rib. This draws connections to the Bible and the women in it, of which the ‘good’ ones embody the virginity, faithfulness and humility in this poem. By bringing attention to the Bible, it would also seem that Dickinson is drawing attention to the structures and institutions which deem these qualities suitable for women. The Biblical women were not written from female pens and thus they embody characteristics which men considered ideal or anathema, not necessarily women themselves. In this way Dickinson hints that the narrative of this poem, the flawless, lovelorn woman, is one of male creation and not one which all women wish to feel, follow or condone. Dickinson’s use of Biblical language is an example of her using her “native language” but shaping it into her own meaning and expression.³⁸ Her use of old-fashioned words such as “thee” and “troth” also seems a deliberate dig at social expectations on women, implying them antiquated.

Dickinson gives us this blushing and pure woman, with a grain of salt, then ends the stanza with, “Seven years of troth have / taught thee / More than Wifhood ever may!” (9-11). This seems a curious close to the series of images she has just written – there is again the clear sense that the narrator is waiting a long time, but she says that waiting could teach someone more than wifhood ever could. It would seem that she is telling herself this enigmatic lesson, but she says “thee”, so it would appear it is someone other than herself. The next assumption would be that the narrator is talking

to the man whose wife she is waiting to become, but that does not quite work either; ‘wifhood’ is the state of being a wife, something a man could not inhabit. So perhaps, then, this line is a clever joke (in the same vein as the immovability of a wife’s affection) and the narrator is addressing any person who would, at some point, be a wife. It seems pretty universal that waiting seven years for something would not be enjoyable, however when you are waiting for something you greatly desire, just as the narrator appears to be, then that would be pure torture. Considering this, Dickinson’s line is then comparing wifhood to seven years of waiting, essentially saying being a wife is like being in severe pain. This final line ends on an exclamation mark, and, considering the idea that Dickinson is using this punctuation feature as an indicator of insincerity or mockery, I think that the poet is making a joke and giving us a little linguistic wink to say she has done so. Machor writes how Dickinson’s poems “command the full force of her ironic and rebellious temperament”, and certainly in this poem, her socially disobedient and ironic tone comes across clearly.³⁹

The third and following stanza is wonderfully unsubtle regarding the poem’s theme and seems to dispel any doubt as to the purpose of the poem and its punctuation. It begins, “Love that never leaped its / socket” (12-13), giving the reader a clear and strong image of the faithful, nineteenth century woman waiting patiently.^{vi} “Socket” also easily auditorily recalls ‘loket’ due to the direct rhyme, which feeds into the idea of the devoted virgin clutching a locket containing her beloved’s hair or miniature. The next line seems to describe the agony inherent in this waiting and being without

^{vi} This line could also be read as somewhat carnal, creating another example of how, through specific linguistics such as active verbs and unusual nouns, Dickinson’s poetry can masquerade as seemingly decent, whilst containing more rebellious, improper themes.

wifehood or a man, with “trust” and “narrow pain” (14-15). At this point, it feels that Dickinson is spreading this idea on relatively thickly; deprived of a husband, all a woman can feel is pain and sadness. Her closing image with a following exclamation mark is the final push of this concept, with “constancy thro’ fire” and “anguish – bare of anodyne” (16-17). Unwavering love through hardship and extreme pain without relief, are what the narrator appears willing to experience for the sake of her love. This state of being would have been thoroughly acceptable at the time this poem was written, with Biblical and puritanical ideals purporting faithfulness and righteous pain as good things for a woman to experience. Once again, the surface meaning of this stanza would be contemporaneously proper and expected, but again we have the exclamation mark as well as the extent to which Dickinson is labouring this female image. This is the last exclamation mark present in the poem, and is the final dramatic flourish following a stanza containing “pain”, “fire” and “anguish”, all pointing at it being the height of Dickinson’s mockery and the close of this particular refrain. The almost melodramatic trajectory of the first three stanzas highlights the qualities and idealised narrative of a perfect and pure woman, but in such a way that mocks the idea that a woman should feel this intensely about a man and suffer through her life until she can be with him.

The second half of the poem, beginning “burden” brings forth a new tone, and changes the set course of the narrative (18). One of the clearest differences between this half of the poem and the section already discussed, is the power dynamic. From “remove”, in the very opening, there is the strong sense that the narrator is a passive character; painful things are done to her and she accepts them. However, this penultimate stanza shows the reader that the narrator is a more active agent in her fate.

“Burden - borne so far / triumphant - /” (18-19) alters the power dynamic and reveals that this pain has been weathered for reasons, though only the narrator knows them fully. What is more, she considers herself “triumphant” toward the end of her story, in the face of supposed pain and torment she has kept secret to protect herself. With this tonal shift, Dickinson is performing what Runzo terms Dickinson’s “metamorphosing personae”.⁴⁰ The narrator has shifted tone and perspective, essentially pulling the rug from beneath the reader and revealing a whole other side to the story and herself. This shift in voice seems the most important technical feature of the poem. It completely alters the meaning of the work and contrasts the two halves of the poem to make each clearer in tone and message.

Dickinson’s narrator successfully bears a secret: it takes the form of “the crown” but is disguised as “thorns” during daylight (20-21). “Thorns” appears within double quotation marks and has a capital letter, which gives it an ironic or satirical tone, continuing in the poetic style established earlier. The thorns are doubtless a reference to Christ and his suffering on the cross, so their presence here, with the punctuation, transforms the anguish of the previous stanzas into something false; the narrator is appearing to suffer but as part of her own agenda. The tone of mimicry in the first half ties in well with this, and the reader is given the sense that, throughout this narrative, the narrator is the one holding all the strings and has not been suffering at all. The closing image of this stanza is the narrator’s donning her diadem after dark, becoming her resplendent and real self once no one is watching. The diadem connotes the power the narrator truly possesses, whilst the thorns show how this power must be hidden and

disguised from onlookers. The diadem is the secret but also the symbol of the secret. It is the power which must be kept hidden as well as the result of the secret.

The strong Biblical language present in this poem draws parallels with most of Dickinson's work, but the emphasis on marriage, thorns and diadem links this piece closely with "Title divine – is mine!" (No. 1072). The similarities serve to make the ideas in this stanza more apparent. When the narrator mentions the different headdresses she dons, there is the inextricable link to Christ, with the narrator essentially being a female embodiment of a Christian prophet. "Title divine – is mine!" is very similar, with the narrator declaring herself "Empress of Calvary" (4). By proclaiming herself empress of that ill-fated hill, the narrator conveys her mental anguish but also her connection with the figure of Christ. This declaration and link with Christ can then turn the narrator's diadem, in "Rearrange a Wife's affection!", into something even more symbolic than a crown: an actual title. When she puts on the diadem, she is becoming a female Christ, a mythical figure representing both the power of women and also the necessity of keeping that power hidden.

The reasons for mythical queens, empresses and tsars recurring in Dickinson's writing have often been analysed, usually with judgements on the poet's life. Michael Dressman writes that the narrators reach "maturity and salvation" through the title, and suggests Dickinson believed marriage a kind of deliverance.⁴¹ Beth Doriani takes the Christ imagery as Dickinson believing herself a prophet and in some divine marriage, whilst Elizabeth Dillon takes the title as an attempt to redefine the roles of marriage from the inside and make it more female-centric due to Dickinson's perceived lesbianism.⁴² All these points seem valid, but also quite driven by Dickinson's

biography and less so by the words on the page. As previously mentioned, it feels somewhat careless to link poems across a collection and then make judgements upon the writer's own life. There is plenty to work from without the narrator having to be an embodiment of the author. As Dressman and Doriani write, the diadem certainly gives the narrator power and casts her as a somewhat mythical female entity, but the attached title can also be seen as a way of introducing female agency into the poem, with the marriage being a way to gain the tools for salvation, rather than being salvation itself. Thinking back to Adrienne Rich's work on Dickinson, the diadem could also be a symbol of the power of a female poet, and how, in the nineteenth century, one's female genius was not to be explored or widely publicised.⁴³

The final stanza brings the reader into direct contact with the narrator's secret, which is "big" but also "bandaged" and will not be relinquished until she "Leads it through the Grave" (24-29). One of the most interesting details of this part is the word "bandaged". This shows a heavy smothering of the secret but also implies that it could be a wound; it is the narrator's triumph but also a potential weakness. In the transcript of this poem, "bandage" is also underlined, as this was edited out in future copies, it seems likely that it was a correct representation of how Dickinson wrote it. This connotes strong bodily associations, not to mention the implication that the secret is continually bleeding. The incredible emphasis this "bandage" gives to the presence of the secret, highlights it as being a clever poetic mechanism – it also recalls the amputated bosom of the second line, creating connections as to the nature of the secret. In dwelling on the secret throughout the poem, and including all the detail around it, the narrator reveals more than she hides. She shows the reader her scorn for traditional

marriage and gender roles, and illustrates women as martyrs but also as capable of possessing much power. Whether the poem is telling the story of a lesbian love affair, a heterosexual infatuation, a marital affair or unrequited love, it does show scorn of traditional gender ideas and conformity. I would argue that through reading the female body and breast here, the secret is revealed as the narrator's disregard for gender and all the restrictions the concept entails.

In this poem the female breast symbolises softness and femininity. It is what sets a woman apart from men and makes her a desirable entity for a man. Without a breast there is no husband or wifedom. Playing with the presence and imagined lack of the breast, the poem illustrates how integral to wifedom and womanhood the organ was considered. Whereas Sexton's "The Breast" feels directly relevant to male objectification and possession, Dickinson's poem seems to focus most on and take issue with the patriarchal expectations around femininity, and uses the breast as the focal point and prime example of these expectations. "Rearrange a Wife's affection!" is not the only example of Dickinson taking this view of the breast. In "One Year ago – jots what?" (No. 296), a male voice speaks in patriarchal tones questioning the narrator's breast and femininity. In this poem, a man and a woman are parting ways, with the female narrator addressing the man: "You said it hurt you—most— / Mine— was an Acorn's Breast—" (17-18). The man has clearly used the apparently timeless "it hurts me more than it hurts you" and the woman has failed to show appropriate grief, and for this 'cold-heartedness' he tells her that she has the hard breast of an acorn. There is a double meaning of the word 'breast' here which feels deliberate. In romantic language the female and male breast are sites of the heart and of love, whilst physically

the male breast is a sign of virility and strength, and the female breast is soft, gentle and the “crown jewel [...] of femininity”.⁴⁴ The allusion to the narrator’s female breast as hard, declares that she is emotionally cold but also that there is fault in her physical breast, because she is not displaying the softness and emotion she ought to as a proper woman. Without crying and wailing, the narrator’s breast has become a hard, impenetrable shell in the eyes of the ex-lover. These two Dickinson poems drive home the concept that, in the eyes of the patriarchal power structure, a soft, pleasant and attractive breast was an integral part of femininity and thus the source of being a socially acceptable woman.

**“Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood
and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.”⁴⁵**

Sexton’s “The Breast” is also not alone in her body of work for explicitly drawing attention to female objectification through images of a man constructing a woman. “Mr. Mine” exudes this theme, with the title alone providing a rather strong indication. It begins: “Notice how he has numbered the blue veins / in my breast” and the poem continues strongly with images of construction and ownership: “he is building a city, a city of flesh [...] Now he constructs me [...] From the wonder of concrete he has molded me”.⁴⁶ The concept that the female form is a sexual one, which requires a man with carnal intentions to give it meaning is conveyed very literally here. The poem also ties in the image of the man being a rich industrialist, which makes his control and

manipulation of the narrator's body feel all the more patriarchal and shows her "flesh [as] a commodity".⁴⁷ As with "The Breast", this poem also gives the narrator more nuance and agency by the end, with her declaring: "Yet in my heart I am go children slow".⁴⁸ The man creates her and gives her monetary value, but in her heart the narrator is wary of him and what he is doing to and for her. "Mr. Mine" adds to the idea of commodification present in "The Breast". The narrator's breast has been literally created by the male character. He is the rich developer; piecing together her parts in accordance with his vision of her body, and then placing a price on her flesh. This seems a very literal parallel with patriarchal construction of the ideal female body, and the concept of patriarchally enforced femininity Dickinson's poems discuss. The female breast becomes the symbol of femininity and is made into sexual capital, showing that the breast can be literally owned by the male who socially constructs it.

Both Dickinson and Sexton use the breast in poetry to illustrate expectations of women and to explore a woman's experience of her own body when she lives in a Western society. Dickinson's use of the breast, when it is in relation to a male character, highlights the expectations created and used to oppress women, and the effects of this oppression. "Rearrange a Wife's affection!" and "One Year ago – jots what?" show that a physical and attractive breast was considered essential for a proper woman and wife, and that the softness of this organ was to be reflected in her heart/emotional breast. This social attitude is summed up nicely by Iris Marion Young, who writes: "we grow up learning that the feminine body is soft", and this expected physical and emotional softness is very much what Dickinson's poems draw attention to.⁴⁹ Another piece of hers which deals with the breast in a male/female dynamic is, "He touched me,

so I live to know” (No. 506), which shifts more toward Sexton’s style. The female narrator is touched by a man in a sexual context and this makes her come alive, and she breathes “a superior air” (8). Generally, the Dickinson poems discussed, give a more macro view on the oppressive social constructs of femininity, whilst paying particular attention to wifhood. Sexton’s poetry is more micro in its focus on the physical results of female oppression. “The Breast” and “Mr. Mine” brim with body parts and concrete detail, and the narrators’ breasts are objectified and manipulated: Sexton makes patriarchal body control and body fragmentation literal on the page. Along similar lines, Sexton’s poem “Wallflower” features a narrator with breasts “made of straw”, a woman who cannot be a proper woman because no man has sexually touched her.⁵⁰

Both poets also write about the breast in solely female narratives, and the tone in these poems makes it clear that the lack of a male gaze eliminates the control and commodification felt by the female body. Dickinson’s “Her breast is fit for pearls” (No. 84) is a sweet, short poem first written as a letter to a female friend.^{vii} In the poem the breast is discussed as being “fit for pearls”, and at the end, the narrator imagines herself as a sparrow who would make a nest beneath the breast and in the heart of the other woman. This exultation of the breast is a far cry from “amputate my freckled bosom” (3) and from a breast like a hard acorn. Unfortunately, due to Dickinson’s editors’ predilections for replacing female pronouns with male pronouns, this theme of the

^{vii} For a long time it was assumed the letter was sent to Samuel Bowles, Mabel Loomis Todd having said so and no future editors having questioned it. However there appears an erased ‘Sue’ on the letter so it is more likely it was sent to her dear friend and sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, née Gilbert, as discussed in *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* ed. by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

breast between women cannot be easily traced through her poems. However, in this piece the images are positive, naturistic and kind, which certainly contrasts with her other poems containing male pronouns and a female breast.

In Sexton's "Song for a Lady", two women have intercourse and lie together in bed with their "breasts and small hips".⁵¹ There is no language of control, objectification or the narrator's body needing a male touch: instead the images are of natural things like rain, swans and flowers. "Woman with Girdle" is another Sexton poem with the breast and no male presence; in it she writes: "your breasts lie down in air, their nipples as uninvolved as warm starfish".⁵² Here the breast is being viewed through an objective but not dispassionate lens: body details are described as they are, but the similes and metaphors are natural, homey images; there is no judgement on the woman's appearance or objectification of her bare body. Certainly, for most of Sexton's bodily poems there is a large difference in tone and image-type depending on whether there is a male in the narrative. The pieces with a solely female presence tend to be more naturistic and lack tones of objectification or ownership.

**"The norms of femininity suppress the body potential
of women."⁵³**

The poetry of Dickinson and Sexton shows the female breast as an essential part of femininity. It is an aspect of the female body under constant, social scrutiny, whose appearance is expected to fit into a strict, but ever-changing, ideal. The poems

discussed, show how the breast is manipulated by patriarchal standards of femininity; manipulations which involve the breast strapped into a highly prescribed role which denies personal autonomy and causes discomfort. These representations of the breast mirror Bordo's argument that "social manipulation of the female body emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the past hundred years".⁵⁴ The emphasis placed on the breast, as a sexual object which must conform to many social expectations, results in the commodification and objectification of women these poems show. Pieces such as "The Breast", "Rearrange a Wife's affection!" and "Mr. Mine" demonstrate the visible fragmentation between the breast and the woman. They illustrate how insidious and deep-rooted patriarchal control of the female body is, and, through bodily language and emotive detail, show the damaging effects on the female narrators in such a way that the reader can see and feel them.

Whilst the poems in this chapter do not show female narrators screaming profanities at metaphors which represent the patriarchy, the pieces are still more active than just illustrating the results of patriarchal oppression. The poetry shows the emotions, thoughts and lives of female breasts and bodies. The works make it clear that, although patriarchal constructs of femininity seek to fragment and commodify the female body, the breasts discussed do belong to actual human beings who have complex lives and valid emotions. "Her breast is fit for pearls" and "Song for a Lady" with their metaphors of nature, show that the female breast is most content and most natural when seen through a narrative perspective stripped of the male gaze. In short, the cultural constructs and constraints around the female breast are so rigid, prescriptive

and resilient that it takes the complete removal of a heterosexual perspective to view and portray them as just human body parts.

¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 142.

² Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 4.

³ Bordo, pp. 143; 166.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 155.

⁵ Anne Sexton, *Love Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 4.

⁶ Sexton, p. 4.

⁷ Sexton, p. 4.

⁸ Sexton, p. 4.

⁹ Sexton, p. 4.

¹⁰ Sexton, p. 4.

¹¹ Sexton, p. 4.

¹² Sexton, p. 5.

¹³ Sexton, p. 5.

¹⁴ Sexton, p. 5.

¹⁵ Sexton, p. 5.

¹⁶ Sexton, p. 5.

¹⁷ Sexton, p. 5.

¹⁸ Sexton, p. 4.

¹⁹ Sexton, p. 5.

²⁰ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 33-35.

²¹ Bartky, p. 35.

²² Paula Bennett, *My Life, a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 1.

²³ Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Picador, 1987), p. 334.

²⁴ The oldest copy is the 1889 transcription found in Amherst College Library, microfilm (PS1541. A11844A, section 4, reel 2).

²⁵ Sarah A. Simmons, 'Rearrange a "Wife's" Affection!' <<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/classroom/spring98/rearrange.html>> [accessed 5 April 2019].

²⁶ R. P. Blackmur, 'Emily Dickinson's Notation', *The Kenyon Review*, 18.2 (1956), 224-37 <www.jstor.org/stable/4333656> [accessed 20 April 2019].

²⁷ Sharon L. Leiter, *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson a Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), p. 164.

²⁸ Willis J. Buckingham, *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), p. 154.

²⁹ 'Reviews - The Walt Whitman Archive' <<https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

³⁰ Billy Collins, *Picnic, Lightning* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), pp. 74-76.

³¹ Emily Dickinson, *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 11.

³² Jane Hedley, 'Surviving to Speak New Language: Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich', *Hypatia*, 7.2 (1992), 40-62 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1992.tb00884.x>> (p. 40).

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- ³³ Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom, *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 11.
- ³⁴ Kamilla Denman, 'Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 2.1 (1993), 22-46 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.0.0168>> (p. 23).
- ³⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 99-121 (p. 102).
- ³⁶ Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë, *The Belgian Essays*, ed. by Sue Lonoff de Cuevas (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 220.
- ³⁷ Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home', p. 113.
- ³⁸ Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home', p. 102.
- ³⁹ James L. Machor, 'Emily Dickinson and the Feminine Rhetoric', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 36 (1980), 131-146 (p. 139).
- ⁴⁰ Sandra Runzo, 'Dickinson, Performance, and the Homoerotic Lyric', *American Literature*, 68.2 (1996), 347-363 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928301>> [accessed 15 May 2019] (p. 351).
- ⁴¹ Michael R. Dressman, 'Empress of Calvary: Mystical Marriage in the Poems of Emily Dickinson', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 42.1 (1977), 39-43 (p. 43).
- ⁴² Beth Doriani, 'Emily Dickinson, Homiletics, and Prophetic Power', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 1.2 (1992), 54-75 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.0.0008>>; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 241.
- ⁴³ Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home', pp. 105-106.
- ⁴⁴ Yalom, p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'Anne Sexton: 1928-1974', *The American Poetry Review*, 41.6 (2012), 7 (p.7).
- ⁴⁶ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁷ Anne Sexton, *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 15.
- ⁴⁸ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁹ Iris Marion Young, "Is There a Woman's World? Some Reflections on the Struggle for Our Bodies", cited in Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 35.; Bartky was present at conference where Young presented these ideas, quote taken not from publication but from conference paper.
- ⁵⁰ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 76.
- ⁵¹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 32.
- ⁵² Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 70.
- ⁵³ Young, quoted in Bartky, p. 35.
- ⁵⁴ Bordo, p. 143.

The Hands

“Women’s bodies were seen as a site of contestation, as a focal point for the struggles of power.”¹

As with the breast, hands are a body part laden with social symbolism. Most immediately, hands are active purveyors of messages and meaning. Farah Karim Cooper encapsulates the range of the appendage, writing, “the hand...is the part of our body, apart from the face, with which we communicate most expressively and passionately.”² Each lone finger, when held in a certain position, can itself convey a meaning, from an enthusiastic thumbs-up to a more irate extended third finger. There is sign language which is a perfect example of how necessary hands can be to socialise and communicate successfully with others, and to be an accepted and understood member of a community. Specific hand gestures can also imply one’s affiliation with a certain group or form a secret code – think silent film gangsters with their stealthy hand signals.ⁱ As well as creating specific meaning through their movement, hands themselves hold meanings. A hand formed into a fist can imply violence, frustration or rebellion. An outstretched, open hand can symbolise surrender, peace or acceptance. Hands are also the most immediate way many people interact with their environment in a tactile sense, and, as D. T. Suzuki writes, “Touch...symbolizes the totality of man’s sense of his physical being”.³ Cooper then builds on the idea of touch, saying, “the hand is the instrument with which we engage with the physical world.”⁴

ⁱ For example, what Buster Keaton satirises in *The High Sign*.

Thus, hands are not just a large part of how the world perceives a person, they are a large part of how a person perceives the world. As a symbol and a concept, hands imply autonomy. They are the parts of our bodies that ‘do’ – we use them to fashion tools, clothing and for precise delicate tasks. They are also what we use to commit loving or violent actions, their physical capabilities setting us apart from most animals. Hands in the work of Dickinson and Sexton, connect most particularly with this sense of autonomy.

Kimberly Cox writes on several nineteenth century writers and notes how their narrators “communicated their passions, reciprocated desires, and negotiated the power dynamics of their social and romantic relationships through their hands”.⁵ In both Dickinson’s and Sexton’s poetry when hands are mentioned, the appendages are often personified and given emotions or actions, which affect the tone and relationships in the particular poems. There are clear connections between the two poets’ hand-related poems. These connections highlight hands as being one of the most powerful body parts. In the poems, hands are capable of supernatural feats, bearing great loads and representing the narrator’s fears and desires. From this, hands become an essential part of reclaiming the narrator’s female body from patriarchal forces.

Sexton’s poem, “The Touch” explores a female narrator’s relationship with her hand. As with “The Breast”, this poem covers a section of the narrator’s life and includes the personification of a body part – in this case the hand. The poem begins, “For months my hand had been sealed off / in a tin box.”⁶ Both narrator and hand are somewhat estranged, and the narrator describes her extremity in increasingly elaborate metaphors. In the middle of the piece, the beginning of the third stanza, the narrative voice shifts abruptly – all pretence and decorative language is dropped with the narrator

saying, “And all this is metaphor. An ordinary hand – just lonely / for something to touch / that touches back.”⁷ The shut-off hand symbolises the narrator’s loneliness. The poem reveals that although the narrator can dress up her life, she can feel still vulnerable in some respects and is lonely. After this admission, the tone and language of the poem changes. The narrator lists those who do not touch her hand, and whilst she still uses image-rich language and strong voice driven lines, the concepts themselves are much clearer and down to earth. An example of this is when she repines that the dog will not come to her for touch, because she is “no better than a case of dog food.”⁸ The trouble with this lack of touch and the loneliness, as the narrator sees it, is that she is letting her “gestures freeze”.⁹ It is evident how important the narrator believes hands to be; if her power to gesture and use them freezes, then it is clear she will be distraught. To the narrator, touch is required for her hand to be natural and work correctly – it is an integral part of her happiness and existence.

The final stanza shows the narrator obtaining the touch for which she has longed, with the first line being: “Then all this became history. / Your hand found mine.”¹⁰ A person has located the narrator’s dying hand, and, through touch, made life leap to her fingers “like a blood clot”.¹¹ This last stanza is more tonally upbeat and features the two hands dancing together, with the narrator’s hand being “alive all over America”.¹² Now that the narrator’s hand is alive, the poem appears to say it will never die. The narrator pronounces, “Not even death will stop it” and ends the poem on “Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom / and the kingdom come.”¹³ The reference here to ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ (Matthew 6:9-13), shows the importance the narrator places on her free hand, and implies that female body autonomy is the “kingdom”; it is heaven. This final sentiment changes the trajectory of the ending somewhat. The poem seemed it would

become the classic ‘boy saves girl from life of loneliness, boy and girl live happily ever after’, but this is not the feeling by the end. Once the hand has been given the ‘touch of life’ it dances with the other’s hand. However, this second person is not mentioned at the poem’s close – it is “my” hand which is alive all over America, and it is hand singular which shall not be stopped by death. It almost seems that once the narrator’s hand was brought to life and was given some worldly experience, then it no longer needed another being to stay alive. However, it could also be the case that the simple contact received was so transcendent that it was enough to fuel the narrator forever, until “kingdom come”. Whichever reading seems most valid, it is still certainly worthy of note that whilst one may assume this was the narrator pining for a male touch, the poem does not actually gender the second hand. Perhaps the hand is naturally assumed male, or perhaps the poem is actually just recounting how a loving human touch can be important and nigh on necessary. This poem is not overflowing with autonomous hands smashing patriarchal power structures, but it is certainly very relevant to this chapter. The poem introduces the female hand in poetry, and shows the importance placed on the appendage by both the narrator and the narrative.

There is a dark undertone at moments in “The Touch”, which shows that, even in this very human narrative, there are still forces exerting power over the female hand – a hand which often does not seem to be its own master. The initial sign of this is in the first stanza, when the narrator mentions a “they” which is responsible for locking the hand away. The narrator ponders why her hand has been sealed off, and surmises, “Perhaps it is bruised [...] and that is why they have locked it up”.¹⁴ However, this reason for imprisonment seems less likely by the next line, as when she looks at the hand, “it lay[s] there quietly”.¹⁵ This concept of the controlling “they” feels very

relatable to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* – it is as if the hand has been deemed unhealthy by a governing force and therefore dismembered and locked away for the narrator's benefit. The incarceration does not seem constructive, and as the narrator notes, her hand has become “nothing but vulnerable”.¹⁶ In fact, what this confinement means is that the hand is unable to find another to touch.

When analysing Sexton's metaphorical beginning, and the ambiguity and lack of plurals at the end, the narrative of “The Touch” becomes similar to that of Dickinson's “Rearrange a Wife's Affection!”. In the beginning, the hand lies in the “tin box” “like an unconscious woman / fed by tubes”.¹⁷ However, once it is touched, the hand breaks free and “the fingers are rebuilt”; it then dances around the world and appears to gain immortality.¹⁸ It seems that once the hand has broken free, it is unable to be contained – in fact it grows to become something untameable and supernatural. The unstoppable power of the narrator's hand seems a very clear metaphor for autonomy. The shift from plural hands to the singular hand also shows that whilst the narrator's appendage needed human touch and kindness to escape its forced confinement, it did not need another person to help it maintain and enjoy its freedom. As with Dickinson's aforementioned poem, the narrator is able to break out of a patriarchal and restrictive situation, through her body becoming supernatural and uninhibited.ⁱⁱ

The ending changes the narrative into one of emancipation, with the hand being the source of autonomy and its release providing the narrator's female body freedom. The entirety of the poem also shows how integral human touch is to a person's life. As

ⁱⁱ I say patriarchal as Sexton's metaphor with the “they” seems to assume the reader has an understanding or at least inkling of what this group might be, and there seems no more obvious answer than the patriarchy – the structure which has pathologised and regulated women's bodies for centuries.

already stated, for this piece the touch does not have to be sexual. The narrator first looks to her dog, sisters and father for haptic comfort before her hand is found by the new character. Sexton's poetry is often taken as autobiographical confession, and thus "The Touch" seems most commonly read as a heterosexual love poem.¹⁹ However, the second hand is never gendered, and if one were to take it as autobiographical, it could just as easily be read as being her female friend, Sylvia Plathⁱⁱⁱ – especially given the references to death, which was something she and Sexton discussed often.²⁰ But whatever the reading, it is certain that touch plays a large role in the narrator's life and when the ability to touch another hand is given to her, she is able to take power from it, both to reclaim her body and her own narrative.

In another Sexton poem, "You, Doctor Martin", hands are clearly connected with a woman's autonomy. The poem features a female narrator talking to the doctor of a mental institution, "You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness".²¹ She places her voice alongside the patients, addressing the doctor with the first-person plural "we". The group of patients are quickly painted as inmates, with images such as, "we stand in broken / lines" and "they unlock / the doors and count us at the frozen gates".²² The narrator switches to the singular "I" in the third stanza, in which she immediately turns to describing the body. First she talks about the patients' bodies, "There are no knives / for cutting your throat", then she brings it back to herself and her own narrative: "At first my hands / kept empty, unraveled for the lives / they used

ⁱⁱⁱ In Sexton's biography, George Starbuck recalls escorting Anne and Sylvia to drinks, and remembers their friendship and constant discussion of suicide attempts. In her poem after Sylvia's death (called "Sylvia's Death"), Sexton remembers the letters Sylvia wrote her, and also refers to Starbuck's memory and the death she and Sylvia shared a fascination of, "the death we said we both outgrew, / the one we wore on our skinny breasts, / the one we talked of so often each time / we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston".

to work. Now I learn to take / them back, each angry finger that demands / I mend what another will break / tomorrow.”²³ The first image in this stanza, regarding the lack of knives, makes it clear that the inmates are not independent or autonomous – they are under supervision, with their liberties tightly controlled. Of course, the mental institution setting makes the withholding of sharp implements understandable, but the earlier establishment of the patients as prisoners, blurs the line between benevolent oversight and structural removal of agency.

This poem is generally taken as a reference to Sexton’s psychiatrist, Doctor Orne, and is presumed to show her “bitter feelings towards the hospital system and towards her psychiatrist”.²⁴ However, here again arises the problem we encountered with Dickinson criticism, the issue of presuming author as narrator. To place this assumption onto the extravagant metaphors and intricate narratives which make up Sexton’s poetry, is, as Jo Gill says, “reductive, and indeed pathological”.²⁵ Such a reading of this poem ignores the power play between the narrator and the structure around her, as well as the greater implications of her body-focused imagery.

The way the narrator sees and feels her own hands in the third stanza has multiple layers of meaning, but all seem to be predicated on the concept of hands being sites of activity and action. She notes, that early on in the institution, her hands were kept empty. The word “kept” strongly implies a lack of autonomy; it is something being held or retained. Considering this, it seems the narrator’s hands, the centre of her action and independence, are being denied agency and power. This idea is taken further by the following line, that her hands were unravelled for “the lives / they used to work”.²⁶ Again, there does not seem personal autonomy here for the narrator, in fact it is harsher than the previous line – her hands have been literally undone and deconstructed. It

could be read that she harmed someone with them, and the institution is attempting to stop this happening again. However, the hints of this establishment having a potentially dubious motivation imply that there could be another reason. The narrator's hands had committed an offence to make her a prisoner, and it seems clear that their action was not in agreement with those whose power she is now under. So, if this institution is in fact not a benevolent one and its first response was to restrain the narrator's independence, then perhaps she was using her hands too freely and creating too much meaning with them. Regarding this reading, it seems pertinent to note that the doctor is gendered male, referred to as a "prince", whilst the narrator genders herself female. This makes a reading of patriarchal control and female suppression seem creditable.

Sylvia Blood makes the point that the female body is a "medium for power and social control, a site of struggle and contestation".²⁷ Whilst some critics believe that viewing the body as a battleground is not a positive stance, it certainly seems valid in most circumstances.^{iv} It is particularly valid regarding the poems under discussion, as well as the approach this chapter takes to female hands and their struggle. Hands, in "You, Doctor Martin", certainly speak to power and struggle. The hands have been forcibly kept still and empty, but this changes by the end of the third stanza, with the narrator saying that she is taking back "each angry finger".²⁸ The fact that each, separate finger is angry gives the hand, as a whole, a high level of emotional autonomy, it also implies that the hand itself, with all five fingers attached, must be beyond furious. The verb "take" is used for how the narrator is regaining control of her fingers. This

^{iv} Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* illustrates how viewing a disease, such as cancer, as an invader, and the body as a battle ground can be unhealthy for the sufferer as well as have negative effects on social and political rhetoric.

word feels very much like a reference back to the “kept” – now the narrator is fighting back against her removal of independence and doing so with her hands. With hands being natural symbols of autonomy, the fight the narrator is undergoing becomes a metaphor for the independence of her whole body. Up to this point, the hands were suppressed, which is, as discussed, a clear physical metaphor for imprisonment and removal of agency. However, it is also much more than that. As mentioned in the introduction, and shown by Sexton’s “The Touch”, the ability to touch and physically feel is a huge part of the human experience. By having her hands kept empty, not feeling the velvet of a rose petal or the warmth of a lover’s cheek, the narrator is losing an enormous portion of her life experience. In this way, not only is the narrator reclaiming her ability to use her hands for physical activities and to shape meanings; she is regaining her ability to live as a human being.

In the full narrative of the poem, the narrator regains the use of her hands, but remains in the institution, making rows of leather moccasins. The poem feels bittersweet: the narrator takes back some of herself but is unable to use her hands to literally to break free of her prison confines. However, her reclamation of hand function and the fact that her fingers feel anger, serves to break her body free from patriarchal and social restrictions. In the final stanza she says, “Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself”.²⁹ This simple statement shows that she has reclaimed her body – she is unabashedly herself. Blood writes regarding the female body, “Because few women’s bodies fit the ideal, most women ‘must’ fail to measure up to current standards of femininity. But to ignore them is to risk being an outcast, from femininity, desirability and normality.”³⁰ Sexton’s narrator has given up trying to be “beautiful” and become herself, and by doing this, it seems she has cemented her position as an inmate. She has

angry hands and is not physically attractive by her social standards, so her body certainly does not conform, and for this she is alienated and locked up. In this way, the world of the mental institution can become the entire Western world, and the narrator is a symbol of women struggling for control of their own bodies.

Moccasins are a recurring theme throughout this piece and provide an interesting addition in terms of autonomy. The narrator is using her hands to make shoes (shoes being a clear symbol of escape and independence) which shows her desire to break out and the role her hands play in creating the means for flight. The rows of moccasins at the end illustrate the narrator's need for release, but also the fact that she is not able to leave.

In the Sexton poems discussed, female hands have been a symbol of independence, and an integral part of the narrators' life and her interaction with the patriarchy. In the poems there is often a sense of helplessness, as if the narrators are trying to use their hands to break free of the situations or bonds holding them back, but are not quite able. Both poems feature hands being sentient and possessing skills beyond the ordinary, especially in "The Touch", where the hands become so independent and powerful that they are beyond social and physical constraints. This turn to the supernatural highlights the opposition the hands feel they are facing. The situations in each poem are dark, insidious and have clear parallels to feminist social issues. It is then as if the hands have to become paranormal and mythical to have any hope of escaping their circumstances. In "You, Doctor Martin", the hands are sufficiently sentient and emotional to claim themselves back from higher powers, but they do not assume a phenomenon that is powerful enough to let them escape. The power structure around them is too strong. In this poem the narrator seems like a subject

inside the panopticon – she is being supervised and controlled by an alarmingly organised and manipulative group.

**“The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form
is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the
strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a
different set of terms.”³¹**

In Emily Dickinson’s collection of poetry, she mentions hands many times, and numerous poems feature hands possessing supernatural powers. S. P. Rosenbaum writes that “hand” or “hands” appear one hundred and twelve times in a sample of just over one hundred poems.³² Dickinson’s mentions of hands can be loosely categorised into several areas.^v There are her nature poems, wherein the hand is touching flora or fauna, or is itself an anthropomorphised natural phenomenon, such as No. 321 “Of all the Sounds despatched abroad” and No. 470 “I am alive - I guess –”. There are poems stacked with “idle hands”, often belonging to the dead, such as No. 45 “There’s something quieter than sleep”. There are poems where heavenly hands scoop up beings and souls or act upon the narrator, such as No. 78 “A poor - torn heart - a tattered heart –”. Finally, there are hands which belong to a female narrator and perform many grand, supernatural actions. It is in this latter category that Dickinson’s No. 540 “I took my Power in my hand” fits. The poetic interpretation of hands in this poem follows on

^v This exercise of categorisation is in no way meant to be reductive, naturally some poems will feature hand detail from more than one category, but it is a necessary process due to Dickinson’s extensive number of poems.

nicely from Sexton's poems. The piece also speaks out against the enduring, editorially cultivated, image of Dickinson "as an icon of passive femininity".³³ The poem begins, "I took my Power in my hand" (1). This line is a simple and to the point expression of what is at the centre of this short poem; a first-person narrator, power and a hand. Some of Dickinson's poems under discussion do not gender the narrator, but, given that Dickinson uses mostly female narrators and given the poems' content, it seems most likely the narrators of these pieces are female.

Dickinson's poem is just eight lines long, but it delivers some very clear ideas on power and the female hand. The first line, implies two main things: first that the narrator's hand has the ability to hold something strong and intangible, and second, that perhaps her power is not very large, as it is able to fit in her hand. The second line sees the narrator wielding her power and going "against the world" (2). As with "You, Doctor Martin", the hand here is the main site of bodily action: the narrator is using her hand to contain and brandish her power. The next two lines are likely the most revealing in terms of the narrator's motivations. She says, "'Twas not so much as David – had – / But I – was twice as bold" (3-4). As with many of her poems, Dickinson invokes a Biblical reference here, reminding readers that the Bible stories were so often at the core of her processing the world through poetry, and that "her understanding of religion and her understanding of poetry... endlessly fed off each other as the fertile ground of her imagination".³⁴ The presence of David here seems quite unambiguous. It is possible that the narrator is saying she has not as much power as David, for God is not fully behind her, but there seems a more obvious reading: David is a man.^{vi} This is another

^{vi} It seems worth noting that David was a musician; he played the lyre and sang songs of his own composition, so in a sense he was a poet.

indication that the narrator here is female – she is saying she does not possess as much power as a man, but, despite this, she is still more “bold” than the Biblical shepherd.

Although the narrator daringly aims her “pebble” at Goliath, she is “all the one that fell” (6). Her weapon being a pebble rather than a stone, reinforces that the narrator was not given as much chance or power as David. After her defeat, she wonders, “Was it Goliath – was too large – / Or was myself – too small?” (7-8). The poem ends on this question, leaving the reader dwelling on ideas of size and power. Ending with the dash, followed by “too small”, makes it seem that it was indeed the narrator’s diminutive stature, little weapon and small amount of power which led to her downfall. The choice of the final two words, and their being split from other words through punctuation, shows that the issue of the female narrator being very diminutive is what the poem wants to leave, front and centre, in the reader’s mind. Goliath being “too large” is expressed with similar punctuation and seems to show that whilst the narrator was too small, her opponent was also too huge for a fair fight.

The consistent focus on the size of the female narrator’s body and power suggests a Foucauldian feminist reading would be most useful for critically engaging with the poem. Foucault’s analysis of the socially fashioned “docile body” is very relevant to feminist theory about feminisation and the female body.³⁵ Sandra Bartky extends his arguments to cover and illustrate the social controls and pressures on the female body. An issue with Foucault’s analysis of the body, is that he treated all bodies as the same, creating no room for critiquing the specific and numerous ways in which society pressures those born biologically female. This reflects and “perpetuate[s] the silence and powerlessness” Western political theories have consistently granted women.³⁶ Bartky takes Foucault’s theories and uses them to show how socially enforced acts of

discipline have the effect of making women smaller, quieter and less spatially active. She looks at dieting, hair removal and age defying processes, as she says, “no one is marched off for electrolysis at gunpoint”, yet the disciplinary observations of femininity demand that women perform these things, and they do.³⁷ The construction of an ideal female body and female human being has been emphasised as essential for hundreds of years. As Blood stated earlier, this ideal is unattainable for so many, but it is socially enforced that women attain this image. They are socially punished for not being near the ideal and cast out if they refuse to pursue it.

Something Bartky and Iris Marion Young stress as being an incredibly important part of imposed femininity, is bodily comportment. Famously in her essay, “Throwing like a girl: a phenomenology of feminine body comportment, motility and spatiality”, Young discusses a physical space surrounding girls and women which, when performing physical actions, they are hesitant to move outside of.³⁸ Young writes, “for many women...a space surrounds them in imagination which we are not free to move beyond”.³⁹ This is where Dickinson’s poem comes back in. The narrator of “I took my Power in my hand” is described as “too small”, something which can easily be read as the result of being socialised as female in Western society. Her power also appears slight, again another clear parallel with the socialisation of a nineteenth century, Western woman. Goliath appears very large and she is too small to oppose him effectively by herself, which seems a clear metaphor for a woman trying to go against the patriarchal powers, but not having enough social power to break herself free. However, when seeing this through Young’s analysis, the narrator is still taking a stand against patriarchal edicts of femininity. The woman uses her hands to hold her power and to sling a pebble at Goliath. In undertaking this action, the narrator becomes what

Bartky calls a “loose woman”: she goes beyond her physical boundaries of existing passively, with her legs together and hands crossed, to lobbing a projectile in the face of a vast man.⁴⁰

Much of a standard, Western woman’s life is spent altering her mental and physical appearance, so she is feminine enough to fit her social role. Young describes the physical constraints placed upon young girls, so their comportment complies with prescribed femininity, and Bartky reflects this in her list of the feminisation processes undertaken by women. Bartky’s list painfully reiterates the amount of time and energy women are expected to expend in order to achieve the socially prescribed goal. According to her, these undertakings turn women into Foucault’s “docile bodies”, and thus keep them under patriarchal control. But, to take Bartky a step further and combine her with Young, we can see that there is surely another reason for this constant ‘beautifying’ process. The Western patriarchy is a structure greatly concerned with hierarchy and control, and whilst women and their bodies have been in subjection so long, the power structure can certainly recognise that they are a large part of the population and could pose a threat under the right conditions. In this way, it seems that another clear motive of this unattainable image of femininity is, essentially, to keep women busy. Bartky, herself, talks of the “iron will” women exert to diet themselves, as well as the pain they endure from “fine sandpaper”, “tweezers”, “hot wax” and the “electric current down a needle” – all in the name of female beauty.⁴¹ Surely this level of self-control, endurance and tolerance to pain is a very powerful combination, and if collectively harnessed, could topple any major power structure. Also, if society ceased to alter the physical expressions of girls when they were young, perhaps women would fight back more easily – and this is one of the things the supernatural hands in

Dickinson and Sexton emphasise. The hands are capable of performing amazing feats and showing mental prowess, and they do this *by* disregarding correct female comportment and femininity. Thus, they come to symbolise the female body cut loose of patriarchal confinement. The paranormal qualities and actions of the hands illustrate how awesome and powerful an unfettered female body would appear, in a world of women expected to exist as a homogenous group. On a gloomier note, the necessity for supernatural capabilities also shows the difficulty of freeing a female body from the subordinating, social disciplinarians of the patriarchy.

Both Dickinson's and Sexton's poems show an overshadowing presence, a controlling power structure, best exemplified by Dickinson's metaphor of Goliath. The fact that hands feature as major points in these works, show the narrators' desire to be actively independent of the worlds around them. The patriarchal power structure present feels gargantuan and insurmountable, which is emphasised by the recurring supernatural hands motif. In "The Touch", the woman's hand was not strong enough to break out from an imprisoning tin box, but, by the end, the extremity was incredibly animate and apparently immortal. The hand was unable to break out without help: it needed aid and a helping hand to escape, even though it was capable of performing incredible feats once it was free. This seems to show that, in the case of the narrator, teamwork and pure love are things the patriarchy tries to eradicate, so those things are also effective ways of undermining the system. The paranormal actions of the hand only being effective once it was freed also show that even an incredible amount of power, in the hands of a woman, cannot be enough to free her body from the patriarchy. In Dickinson's poem, the hand was unable to triumph even when she wielded all her

power against her opponent, which perhaps shows the difference in temporal distance between the two narrators.

Another Dickinson poem which clearly shows the link between hands and power is No. 454 “It was given to me by the Gods”. The piece features a narrator being given a present when she is but a “little Girl”, an item which remains unnamed, but we know it is precious to her, as she says, “I kept it in my hand – / I never put it down –” (5-6). The narrator keeps it to herself and does not dare eat or drink for the fear “it would be gone” (8). The reader does not find out what the gift is, but the final line tells us that it has made the narrator “bold” (16). It is evident that, what the little girl was given, was something that made her think independently and know her own mind; an item she clearly knew she should not have. It seems clear the present was some kind of autonomy or power; something the gods pressed into her palm before she grew up, before she was fully socialised into womanhood. This may be the case, as Dickinson’s multiple female narrators hold power in their hands and use their hands in extraordinary ways.^{vii} For many Dickinson poems, hands are active and astonishing agents and they will often perform deeds well outside the social expectations placed on a nineteenth century woman.

**“Return us to the black-and-white essence of Anne:
the shape of her mouth as she laughs, the drift of
her cigarette smoke, the bony length of her**

^{vii} Such as No. 323 “As if I asked a Common Alms”, No. 351 “I felt my life with both my hands” and No. 574 “My first well Day – since many ill”.

**beautiful fingers, the love arcing from her eyes as
she looks at her daughter...”⁴²**

In Sexton's and Dickinson's poetry there is another side to the power of hands, where the appendages still relate directly to female body autonomy. Hands, and through them touch, are not just means for rebelling and struggling, but also a means of creating and nurturing. In Sexton's "My Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman" and Dickinson's No. 320 "We play at Paste", there is a theme of being born twice and the female touch creating growth. Sexton's poem is a piece to her growing daughter, Linda, about their maternal bond as well as the course of puberty and the meaning of womanhood. As expected with a poem about the female body, there is much anatomical detail and startling imagery of body parts. These feature a great number of garden references and metaphors, with aspects of Linda often likened to nature; she has a heart "like a puppy" and is "a white stone".⁴³ The narrator holds her daughter's face in her hand, conjuring up images of Linda being sculpted and created by her mother's hand. As the poem progresses, the narrator talks of Linda growing up and her impending womanhood. She also remembers back to her childhood and how she waited "like a target" for what the "old wives" said would come with growing up as a woman.⁴⁴

The narrator says that someday men will come to Linda, with "ladders and hammers / while no one sleeps".⁴⁵ The assumption is that these men will try and enter her, and that they will happily do it whilst being watched, as their actions would be natural and socially acceptable. The word "hammers" is somewhat jarring to read, as we have been shown a world of maternal love and gardens, subjects where the violence

of hammers does not seem welcome. The narrator sees the inevitability of the future men, but she counters the violence by saying,

But before they enter
I will have said,
Your bones are lovely,
and before their strange hands
there was always this hand that formed.⁴⁶

Here the narrator shows how important hands are in the life of a woman – they can change the person they touch. She is using the power of her own hands to affirm and nurture Linda’s body, so that, when the inevitable male touch occurs, and the social requirements of femininity occur through the sexualisation of her body, Linda will be confident in herself and love her own being. A few lines after this section, the narrator gives a very direct sentence, “What I want to say, Linda, / is that women are born twice.”⁴⁷ This goes back to Bartky on the socialisation of women, but also summarises what the hand and touch in this poem are trying to achieve. Once womanhood begins to approach, a girl must start to shave her legs, conduct herself modestly and be aware of men: essentially, she must make herself into a sexual object. This seems a fitting meaning for being “born twice”; the male hand and touch are what sexualise and alienate a woman’s mind from her body, but a female hand is able to undermine this by having a stronger and more positive touch and effect earlier.

Dickinson’s poem has a very similar message. The piece opens, “We play at Paste – / Till qualified, for pearl –” (1-2). This puts the reader in a scene, with little girls playing dress-up in costume jewellery – a time before womanhood and the wearing of real jewels. The narrative quickly moves past this stage of pre-pubescent innocence,

and the collective narrator deems this youthfulness “a fool” (4). Once they hold real jewels, they notice that they have “new Hands” (6). In a similar vein to Sexton, Dickinson paints womanhood as a major shift in a girl’s life, and this change is illustrated by a second birth of the self. Womanhood calls for the narrators here to disregard foolishness and think seriously. The fact that this expected change in attitude is highlighted through gemstones, shows the particular expectations of womanhood, namely the adornment of the body and looking pleasing. The narrator must also be “qualified” for the pearls, implying that womanhood is something akin to a medical degree – something important, which must be studied for. Hands are the only body part mentioned in this piece, which seems to show that the brunt of becoming a woman was felt in the hands. This fits with the previous discussion of hands, as well as with the way Dickinson so often portrays them. Dickinson’s poems, and of course history, show that womanhood in the nineteenth century involved restriction of body and mind. The careless frolicking in fields of a little girl became unacceptable once she entered into womanhood – the paste jewellery becomes foolish. By showing the alteration of hands after becoming a woman, the narrator shows how the expectations placed upon women meant they had to leave behind the independence and insouciance of girlhood and become objects of desire.

Whilst Dickinson’s poem reveals how hands are central sites for viewing the results of social feminisation, it also reveals a more hopeful side. The narrators reveal that the “shapes” of both paste and pearl are “similar” (5). In her thesis on the use of gems in Dickinson’s poetry, Marlia Fontaine-Weisse discusses how they are “largely representative of contemporary cultural attitudes and should, therefore, be treated as a source of historical data”.⁴⁸ Fontaine-Weisse is saying that Dickinson’s use of

gemstones can reveal historical details of the spatial and temporal context around her. We can also apply this in reverse, and look at the historical details around pearls at that time, then apply that to Dickinson's work to gain greater insight into what she might be saying. In their 2013 exhibition on pearls, the Victoria & Albert Museum wrote how the jewels were "objects of desire due to their rarity and beauty" and were often "worn in a seductive manner" as well as holding connotations of purity and innocence.⁴⁹ These contradictory aspects fit perfectly with the qualities expected of a nineteenth century woman. So, when Dickinson's narrator talks of how the pearls were shaped similarly to the paste, and adds that the "new Hands" learned the "Gem-Tactics" of the jewels, it is clear she is talking about more than just wearing pretty gems. Camille Paglia writes how Dickinson "cultivates knavish insolence", and perhaps we see this in her piece, "Tis little I – could care for Pearls", where her narrator belittles and renounces the symbols of femininity and womanhood, but in the poem under discussion, her approach is more subtle and less confrontational.⁵⁰ The hands in the poem concentrate on touching and understanding the pearls – learning their shapes and ways. This, combined with the collective female narration, shows that, whilst touch and hands were changed under womanhood, they could also engage with it, learn it and potentially change it for the better.

These two poems show the dynamic of touch by female hands between women. In Sexton's piece, the maternal hand is creator: it fashioned the daughter and watches over her, wanting to protect her from the worst aspects of womanhood. This highlights touch as a force of nurturing, and as capable of instilling body positivity. Essentially, the hands and the touch become an antidote to the most negative ideas which are socially foisted on the female body – they are able to give another woman's body

freedom from some of the patriarchy's body-focused manipulation. Dickinson's piece also shows how women, as a collective, can use their hands to understand and change the restrictions feminisation places on their bodies. Both poems highlight a woman's 'second birth', showing how each narrator sees womanhood as a whole new world and set of expectations, and in the case of both pieces, as something to be mitigated by the touch of hands.

In a final poem, we see this idea brought to a peak, as it were. Sexton's "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator", shows the male touch replaced by the female hand – the ultimate body reclamation. The poem begins post relationship breakup, with the narrator saying, "The end of the affair is always death".⁵¹ Evidently this line is a sad expression of how the lover leaving has made her feel, but right from the beginning the poem is giving the reader a double meaning. Given the subject of the piece, the invocation of "death" could well be a reference to 'le petite mort', changing the line to say, the end of a relationship always means masturbation and orgasm. In the next line, the narrator refers to her sexual organ as the female pronoun "she" and calls it her "workshop"⁵². This line shows the reader that the narrator is no novice at using her own hand to self-pleasure, with the word "workshop" implying that the narrator habitually hones her art and can create things through her process.

As she is committing the act, she says, "I horrify / those who stand by", clearly referencing the taboo of her action.⁵³ The use of "I horrify" also seems to reference Plath and thus a deeper meaning the action connotes. Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus", which was published four years before Sexton's poem, includes the line, "Do I terrify?"⁵⁴ Plath uses this in the context of appearing onstage in front of a crowd, and performing a bodily striptease of suicide and rebirth. The poem can be read as an

attempt by the narrator to regain control of her own body, taking it back from the men surrounding her. At the end she successfully does this, though she has to die and be reborn to do so, and she gains the power to “eat men like air”.⁵⁵ Given the subject of Plath’s poem, and the body-focus of her female narrator, it does not seem an accident that some of the tone is echoed in Sexton’s piece. Moments where the narrator describes her body as an object, such as “in the bower where you used to mount her” and “you borrowed me”, further compliment the tone in “Lady Lazarus”.⁵⁶ Like this Plath poem, “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” is concerned with issues of female body autonomy, and is perhaps taking the victorious stance of a narrator wresting her body away from male power and patriarchal taboo and expectations.

It has been argued that the narrator uses the act of masturbation in the poem, as a front to talk about her failed relationship. I would, however, disagree that the theme is so black and white.⁵⁷ The narrator lets the reader into her mind, and into her body through her fingers. The effort in the narration shows the multiple levels on which this poem is operating. It is very clear that she misses her lover, but what is not clear is whether she misses his touch.^{viii} She says she is “fed” after her self-given orgasm, then when she talks about a heterosexual couple, she says they are “overfed”.⁵⁸ The narrator also talks about owning her sexual organ, saying “now she’s mine”.⁵⁹ These points, and the general language she uses around her self-pleasure, imply the narrator did not own her body during her affair, and now it is over she is regaining control and liking it. When she talks about how she lost her lover, it is clear she is unhappy, but it seems that she misses him on a human-connection level, rather than lamenting the loss of his

^{viii} I use “he” as the narrator says her lover was taken away by a “she” and later talks about their marriage bed saying “boys and girls”.

sexual expertise and ownership. The narrative of the poem shows how one's ability to touch oneself is an autonomous act and creates further body autonomy. It also seems to show an easy way to undermine the patriarchy and forced feminisation. If women can give themselves sexual pleasure, then they do not have to be sexual objects for others, and thus the feminising processes enforced by the patriarchy are invalid, and women's bodies need not become "docile bodies". Also, on a more human note, the poem shows that not all relationships between a man and a woman must be sexual to be fulfilling.

Sexton's take on touch in this poem, provides much for critical engagement, and shows that hands and touch can be a way to heighten body autonomy and challenge a body-regulatory power structure. When discussing female adolescent sexuality, Deborah L. Tolman writes,

When girls know, experience and speak about those fabulous feelings in their body, trouble follows...Girls' sexual desire upsets people, because it challenges and might upset the cultural mandate which requires that girls (and women) not be connected to their bodies in general, and to their sexual hunger in particular.⁶⁰

This is particularly interesting in terms of the poem, because not only is the narrator openly giving herself pleasure, she is recognising that she has a sexual hunger and is successfully filling it. The patriarchy strives to control women's bodies and their sexuality. Female bodies are to be conditioned as objects of male desire. Arleen B. Dallery discusses the idea that the patriarchy controls the female body and through it her sexuality, writing that, "woman's body is already colonised by the hegemony of male desire; it is not *your* body".⁶¹ The patriarchy controls women's bodies, and thus

their hands, touch and experience, as well as their expression of sexuality. As this is understood to be the case, Sexton's narrator is breaking all the social rules, and through this is undermining the society which seeks to control her body. She is giving and taking the pleasure a man should be controlling: she is knowing and understanding the body that should only be known and understood by a man. She is self-actualizing through her actions. In short, Sexton's narrator is using her hands and ability to touch, to reclaim her body from the patriarchy, and own her sexual experiences. She is also recounting her intimate actions to the reader, so she is also owning the linguistics of her body and pleasure. Dallery writes, "The structures of language and other signifying practices that code woman's body are as equally oppressive as the material/social structures that have tended to mediate one's awareness of one's body and self and erotic possibilities".⁶² This shows the full victory Sexton's narrator achieves: she has completely removed all aspects of her experience from the male word and gaze.

**"Dickinson does wage guerrilla warfare with
society."⁶³**

The Sexton and Dickinson poems discussed show the female hand as oppressed, powerful, supernatural, kind, angry, nurturing and rebellious. In short, they express the hand as an active and passionate entity, consistently trying to obtain better conditions for the bodies (and minds) to which it is attached. The hands illustrate the control methods of the patriarchy, they show the constrictive results of socially enforced feminisation, but also demonstrate the various ways in which to challenge it. The ways in which the hands rebel differs greatly, which reflects the nuances of different

narrators and different situations. This further pushes the idea that women are not homogenous, and possess more complexity than male objectification allows. In general, Sexton's narrators seem to emerge more triumphant than Dickinson's, which highlights the difference in temporality of the narrators but also illustrates that each narrator was constantly rebelling against their social constraints. The wild, wide-ranging and supernatural abilities, demonstrate the power of the unbound female body. They also show how hard it is to break free from a manipulative and insidious, controlling power structure, but also that the hands in the poems were desperate to be free.

The poems show how important hands are to the lives of the narrators. Being centres of touch, hands are the major conduits of the tactility of the human experience. When someone else takes control of the hands, they are able to control the lived experience of the body, and the poems show that not having control over one's hands can be unbearable. As women's bodies are so often sites of patriarchal control, their haptic lives can be tightly restricted and socially prescribed. The hands in this chapter illustrate how central they themselves are to the subjection of female bodies, but through the actions they undertake, they are also shown to be where the fight for female body autonomy begins.

¹ Sylvia K. Blood, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 46.

² Farah Karim Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch and the Spectacle of Dismemberment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=4412637>> [accessed 3 September 2019], p. 3.

³ D. T. Suzuki, *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki. Volume III*, ed. by Jeff Wilson, Tomoe Moriya and Richard M Jaffe (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 158.

⁴ Cooper, p. 3.

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- ⁵ Kimberly Cox, 'A Touch of the Hand: Manual Intercourse in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 72 (2017), 161-191 <doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2017.72.2.161> (p. 161).
- ⁶ Anne Sexton, *Love Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 1.
- ⁷ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ⁸ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ⁹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹⁰ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹¹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹² Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹³ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ¹⁷ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Maria O'Neill, 'Sex and Selfhood in the Poetry of Anne Sexton', in *Many Sundry Wits Gathered Together*, ed. by S. G. Fernández Corugedo (A Coruña, Spain: Universidade da Coruña, Servicio de Publicacións, 1997), 251-259 (p. 252).
- ²⁰ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 107; Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 32.
- ²¹ Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 2.
- ²² Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, p. 2.
- ²³ Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, p. 2.
- ²⁴ Shiho Fukuda, 'Beyond the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Anne Sexton and Her Psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 11 (2006), 2-12 <revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/ESTUDIOS_NORTEAMERICANOS/article/view/4749> [accessed 25 August 2019], (p. 11).
- ²⁵ Jo Gill, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics', *The Review of English Studies*, 55.220 (2004), 425-445 <doi.org/10.1093/res/55.220.425> (p. 427).
- ²⁶ Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, p. 2.
- ²⁷ Blood, p. 47.
- ²⁸ Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, p. 2.
- ²⁹ Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, p. 2.
- ³⁰ Blood, p. 46.
- ³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 24.
- ³² S. P. Rosenbaum, *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 318-319.
- ³³ Amanda Gailey, 'How Anthologists Made Dickinson a Tolerable American Woman Writer', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 14.1 (2005), 62-83 <doi:10.1353/edj.2005.0005>
- ³⁴ Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 162.
- ³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 135.
- ³⁶ Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', in *The Politics of Women's Bodies* ed. by Rose Weitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 76-98 (p. 79).
- ³⁷ Bartky, p. 89.
- ³⁸ Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality', *Human Studies*, 3.1 (1980), 137-56.
- ³⁹ Young, p. 143.
- ⁴⁰ Bartky, p. 82.
- ⁴¹ Bartky, p.83.

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- ⁴² Linda Grey Sexton, 'Introduction', in *Anne Sexton: The Last Summer*, by Arthur Furst (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 13.
- ⁴³ Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 52.
- ⁴⁴ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁵ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 53.
- ⁴⁶ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 53.
- ⁴⁷ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 53.
- ⁴⁸ Marlia E. Fontaine-Weisse, "'Learned Gem Tactics': Exploring Value through Gemstones and Other Precious Materials in Emily Dickinson's Poetry" (unpublished master's thesis: University of Akron, 2012), p. 4 <etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?::NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:47941> [accessed 6 September 2019]
- ⁴⁹ "Pearls: About the Exhibition", Victoria & Albert Museum, 2016
<www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-pearls/about-the-exhibition> [accessed 1 September 2019].
- ⁵⁰ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 634.
- ⁵¹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 25.
- ⁵² Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 25.
- ⁵³ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 25.
- ⁵⁴ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 16.
- ⁵⁵ Plath, p. 17.
- ⁵⁶ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 25.
- ⁵⁷ Steven E. Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 251.
- ⁵⁸ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 26.
- ⁵⁹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 25.
- ⁶⁰ Deborah L. Tolman, 'Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality: Discerning Dilemmas of Desire', in *Women, Girls & Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance*, ed. by Carol Gilligan, Annie G. Rogers and Deborah L. Tolman (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 55-69 (p. 67).
- ⁶¹ Arleen B. Dallery, 'The Politics of Writing (the) Body: *Écriture Féminine*', in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. by Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 52-67 (p. 55).
- ⁶² Dallery, p. 54.
- ⁶³ Paglia, p. 652.

The Mouth

“Admonished by her buckled lips

Let every babbler be.”

(Dickinson, No. 1748)

Unlike the breast, the mouth is less socially judged on how it appears, but no less an integral part of the female body, and its deportment a visual indicator of femininity. What immediately springs to mind is the red lipsticked purr in a smoky speakeasy, the lusciously lippy *Rocky Horror Picture Show* opening sequence,ⁱ or Samuel Beckett's *Not I* lip-centred monologue. The appearance of a woman's mouth and lips are synonymous with femininity. The colour and shape of the lips and teeth provide further data for judging the desired level of womanliness. From Sumeria's Queen Schub-ad and her white lead and red rocks, to Kylie Jenner's lip-kits, plump, scarlet lips have been a sign of sexuality and femininity in multiple cultures for thousands of years. Evolutionary psychologist, Nancy Etcoff, writes that multiple studies show that women wearing red lipstick in Western societies were perceived as younger, more attractive to heterosexual men and sent off “sexual signals”.¹ The female mouth, and the voice which issues from it, are the things most controlled and shaped by the patriarchy. Is the voice too loud, is it soft and feminine, is it expressing itself *appropriately*? Images of the mouth, lips and voice are often combined and slip between each other in the poems

ⁱ Referring to the film sequence, which is voiced by Richard O'Brien but the lips are those of Patricia Quinn.

in this chapter, so ‘the female mouth’ here will naturally include discussions of voice, and the role of the mouth and lips in a woman’s life. Just as hands are signs of autonomy, the mouth is symbolic of agency, with Sexton herself encapsulating this clearly in poetic form: “when your hands are cut off / and no one answers the phone”.² This final line of her poem, “The Fury of Abandonment”, inextricably links hands, agency and action with voice. It shows that losing one’s voice is of equivalent tragedy to hand amputation.

Something which leaps out from Dickinson’s and Sexton’s mouth related poems is violence. Lips are “buckled” and “bleeding”, mouths are “biting” themselves, and the sensation of breath leaving the body is likened to the insertion of “staples”. This profusion of bloody language means that, perhaps more so than other poems contrasted in this thesis, the poems in this chapter are thematically quite similar.

Dickinson’s poem, No. 479 “She dealt her pretty words like Blades” features a ruthless female subject. Her mouth is “bristling with steel cutlery” and she is using it to take on the world.³ The woman is ‘dealing’ out her words – language akin to a card game – which shows she is passing out her violent speech liberally, deliberately and in all directions. There is also a certain authorial deliberateness from the first word: no time is wasted in letting the reader know that the narrator is female. Out of Dickinson’s considerable collection, there are eighteen poems beginning with “she”. Contrast this with the over one hundred and forty-three poems beginning “I”, and the use of she here must be present for a reason. Most of Dickinson’s first person poems clearly feature a female narrator, or one who is female at one point, so it appears quite deliberate in terms of this poem’s context that the subject be immediately understood as female. In

the first line, there is also a clear contrast between “pretty” and “Blades”, the feminine and the masculine. “Pretty” here gives the reader an image of the classic, white, American woman, as depicted in John Singer Sargent’s *Mrs. Henry White* or *Mrs. Abbott Lawrence Rotch*. However, this vision is immediately undercut by the violence of “Blades”. Dickinson has also capitalised the word, which gives more emphasis to the violence this woman is ‘dealing’ out. Whilst nineteenth century feminisation would expect the woman to be attractive and speak demurely, she is taking the language from the social expectations and twisting it. She uses “pretty” words as becomes her social role, but she transforms them into weapons and uses her mouth as a cannon. I would argue that this makes her character a somewhat shocking one. Critics, who shall be discussed, often read this character as an acidic and nasty society woman, akin to a young Lady Bracknell perhaps. However, the metaphor and violent details which permeate this poem, suggest that the character is beyond such a simple explanation.

The first line meets the reader with a barrage of activity, and the intensity does not waver as we move further into the poem. The blades shine, are “glittering”, “and every One unbared a Nerve / Or wantoned with a Bone —” (2-4). Her words are literally slicing people’s flesh to the bone. The violence of the woman’s mouth and words have meant this poem has been met with much critical discussion. Despite the varied angles taken, the female character is generally received as destructive and harsh. Robert Weisbuch calls her a “hateful woman”, and the word “cruel” is repeated by multiple authors, such as Greg Mattingly and Betsy Erkilli.⁴ This woman also forms a supporting piece in Camille Paglia’s argument, which seeks to re-name Dickinson as Amherst’s “Madame de Sade”. In the time honoured fashion, critics also read this woman as a person from Dickinson’s life, namely Susan Gilbert Dickinson.⁵ Susan

could apparently be cutting and cool in conversation, which has led critics to postulate her as the “cruel” woman in this poem. Whilst the main focus is the violence in this poem, Paglia calls attention to the word “wantoned”, arguing that it brings a sexual flavour to the poem and is an “erotic word choice”.⁶ Thus, in Paglia’s eyes, this piece brings together sex and violence, making the narrator a sadistic temptress. However, to balance this, Mattingly also picks up on “wantoned”, but instead takes it as a reference to the excessiveness and looseness of the woman’s cruelty, and does not find it to be introducing a sexual element. In short, it seems the reader is not allowed to like this female character. The discourse around her is varied, but there seems consensus that the woman is not to be admired or respected. By displaying the excessive violence and potential moral looseness that she appears to, she is not conforming to her gender role. These are also the reasons cited for the character being unlikeable and repulsive, so it would seem that the root of her distastefulness is her lack of socially acceptable femininity. This brings up two interesting points regarding female voice, best argued by Cambridge historian Mary Beard.

Beard discusses the treatment of women’s voice in Greek and Roman antiquity. She acknowledges that our society does not owe all our cultural heritage to these civilisations, but also that there are still lasting and visible effects from their cultural attitudes toward the female voice. From looking at Beard’s argument, the judgement of Dickinson’s narrator and the extent to which she is transgressing the social norm, is made clearer. Public speaking in Greek and Roman societies was defined as a masculine skill. Gendered thus, it became a “defining attribute of maleness” and only men could practise it acceptably.⁷ In Homer’s *Odyssey*, we see Telemachus tell his mother, Penelope, that speech is not part of her business. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,

we see multiple women silenced and stripped of the ability to speak. As Beard says, these examples show both cultures' generally successful attempts to "not only exclude women from public speech but also to parade that exclusion".⁸ In the instances where women were allowed vocalisation, it was not permissible for it to be "human speech" – most predominantly their dialogue was described in animalistic terms, such as "barking" or "yapping".⁹ Dickinson's female character echoes this notion of women not being permitted "human speech", but twists it, so rather than making ineffectual animal noises, she is using her mouth to spit honed and beautiful weaponry. This follows on to the second point of Beard's that is particularly relevant for this piece, which is that of socially condoned male violence.

Beard writes of contemporary Western societies, "our mental, cultural template for a powerful person remains resolutely male".¹⁰ She then charts how this is disturbingly and closely reflective of Grecian and Roman society. She notes that in the Classical world, when mortal women possessed power, it made them "un-women".¹¹ Furthermore, as women were biologically unsuitable to hold power, they became unstable and their surroundings descended into chaos and ruin. Medea and Clytemnestra are model examples of this phenomenon, and notably both meet fitting ends which re-establish the rightfulness of male dominance. In this particular short volume, Beard does not fully discuss women's relationship with violence: rather she writes about their much more common position as the targets of male aggression. Medusa is the prime example of female victimhood: she is magically transformed from a beautiful woman for her 'participation' in her own sexual assault, and is given the hideous, snake adorned visage we see in sculpture and paint. She is then killed by the classic hero Perseus, and it is considered good riddance as she was hideously un-

feminine and had the aggressive power to turn anyone, including strong and powerful men, to stone. We can extend the Medusa story to cover what Beard implies, but does not go into. Women had no place using violence, especially against men, and both the power of speech and that of the sword was rightfully a man's. This phenomenon is also clear in the Greek myths of the Amazon women. They had their own functioning society and were expert warriors, but Grecian writing illustrates that the "only good Amazon was a dead one, or...one that had been mastered, in the bedroom".¹² Women were better off dead than being openly, physically and vocally strong. Beard takes these examples from the Classical world and shows how much they permeate current Western culture's attitude toward women possessing speech and power.

**"Powerful speech has long been associated with
masculinity and powerless speech with femininity."¹³**

This historical analysis shows just what Dickinson's female character is doing and achieving, whether we like the character or not. She is reclaiming her voice from a society that says she has no place using it loudly, and, in fact, she is going beyond loud by actually expelling blades. The social conditioning, which has traversed centuries, seems the likely reason for Dickinson's character being so critically reviled. This does not seem a stretch, considering the clear contrasts in the receptions of violent and outspoken male and female characters in the literary world. Take, for instance, the hugely differing receptions of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) and Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* (1991). Zahavi's novel, which features a woman embarking

on a weekend killing spree, as opposed to Ellis's male serial killer, shocked audiences with its violence and did not sell nearly as well as Ellis's book.¹⁴ This is particularly enlightening with regard to public perceptions of women being violent and in control, because, in actuality, *American Psycho* is the more explicit and gore-filled novel. Despite the differing characters and narratives, the violent female character was judged most harshly, unequivocally showing social attitudes to women stepping out of their social spheres. It is not our job to be the murderers or rapists.

The general feeling toward Dickinson's character in "She dealt her pretty words like Blades", highlights our inherited social conditioning, and how transgressive a woman using violence is, especially when it's from her mouth – a place whose utterances are strictly, socially controlled. With one action of her mouth, she is reclaiming her right to speak and inflict violence, and she is unlikeable due to her flagrant disregard for female social decorum. She is also claiming her right to be human by completely forgoing those animal utterances Beard mentions, and through this she highlights how 'othered' women are in terms of voice and self-expression. It is also clear she knows what she is doing and is unapologetic, as the next stanza says, "She never deemed – she hurt –" (5). "Deemed" being the operative word, the character is claiming the power position in the poem, and she will not own responsibility for hurting others. In tying together the female mouth, voice and violence with a defiant tone, Dickinson's "She dealt her pretty words like Blades" achieves a sense of the female mind and body being independent from social moorings. Whilst other Dickinson and Sexton poems blend the mouth and violence, Dickinson's poem here sees the most victorious and successful narrator in terms of female body autonomy. The poem also shows the mouth as an active agent in the violence associated with it. This level of

perpetration is absent from most other poems by the two poets that mention the mouth, which shows the female mouth's common place in society as an object to be acted on rather than to act in its own right.

“We don’t have names.

We change them as men exchange us,

as they use us.”¹⁵

Sexton’s “The Kiss” illustrates a particular perspective of the mouth, one which permeates many poems, and illustrates what the mouth itself experiences in the life and social role it has. The poem opens with a striking and particularly Sexton-esque line, “My mouth blooms like a cut”.¹⁶ Immediately the image conveys red blood and violence. Unlike Dickinson’s piece, the mouth here is the victim of an attack, it is the one bleeding into the opening of the poem. The narrative of this work is one which occurs in both Dickinson’s and Sexton’s respective opuses: a character arrives and revitalises the body of the female narrator through a form of physical contact. Here the narrator calls her body a boat, “quite wooden / and with no business, no salt water under it / and in need of some paint”.¹⁷ However, once they have come, the arriving character “hoist[s]” and “rig[s] her”, and she says now her nerves “are turned on”.¹⁸ This is a similar piece to her poem, “The Touch” and is from the same collection, but the narrator’s body here is much more passive. “The Kiss” is most certainly a love poem, and it is clear the narrator is delighted by the awakening of her body – to say anything

to the contrary would be removing the autonomy the poem gives her. Despite her enjoyment of her experience, it is undeniable that the narrator's body is incredibly still and passive throughout the piece. In the first stanza, after the shocking opening image, the narrator says, "I've been wronged all year" and recalls "rough elbows" and "delicate boxes of Kleenex" which call her "crybaby" and "you fool".¹⁹ This underscores the narrator's portrayal of a passive body, an entity which others inflict cruelties upon. The mouth is the first location to be associated with violent imagery, which suggests a kind of expectation. If there is going to be a piece featuring violence against the female body, it seems logical that the initial point of contact is the mouth. It is, after all, the place in which passivity is most encouraged by the patriarchy.

Sexton's poem is somewhat the opposite of Dickinson's. It paints a more conventional scene, in which a woman's mouth is suffering. There is of course the opportunity to read the opening line as the mouth blooming in the sense a flower does, doing something beautiful and natural. However, the final word, "cut" undermines such a reading, and gives the reader an image of the spreading blossom of blood from a freshly made wound. The mouth becomes the source of the narrator's harm and, although it is the opening subject of the poem and the titular action requires its presence, it is not an active agent. The kiss of the title indicates that the mouth will take centre stage, but what the narrative of the poem shows is the mouth as a pliable, sexual object which the other character uses. As discussed, "The Kiss" has a similar narrative of rejuvenation to "The Touch", but whereas in the latter poem the hand was "unconscious", in this piece the body was "useless" before the mouth was kissed.²⁰ In fact, the narrator calls the kiss "a resurrection", implying the body was previously dead, rather than just incapacitated.²¹ We also do not see the mouth open in the poem – there

is no voice issuing forth. It is the kissing role of the mouth which is the only important thing here. The inference from this seems to be that the female mouth is only valuable in its sexual capacity, and within that, only as a passive participant.

Sexton's image of blood and lips speaks to the violence imbedded in the mouths which feature in many of hers and Dickinson's poems. This recurring image of blood and female lips reflects a repeated cultural motif of violence and the female body. I would argue that Sexton's poem beginning with the bloodied lips reflects our cultural images. As Luce Irigaray looks at in "When Our lips Speak Together", female lips are oppressed from the very beginning of a woman's life. They are "violated", "muffled and stifled" by the language which they speak, echoing Adrienne Rich's notion of "the oppressor's language".²² And whilst bringing this text into the twenty-first century and recognising that the masculine language oppresses the expressions of gender fluid and non-binary people, Irigaray's original writing has some specific content related to the female lips – that is to say both sets of lips. Irigaray's writing is deliberately fragmented and subversive, so which set of female lips she is referring to becomes ambiguous at points.²³ Those engaging with her piece critically note the "seductive" way in which Irigaray writes.²⁴ Whilst such a reading feels problematic – equating a woman writing on the language of intimate body parts as inviting sexualisation – the double meaning around the female lips is undeniably present. This dual meaning becomes particularly evident at several points, especially when she discusses communication between two women, saying, "two lips kiss two lips".²⁵ Irigaray's linking of the two sets of lips shows how two sets of voices are continually silenced by the patriarchy; self-expression in the form of words from a woman's mouth as well as a woman freely expressing her own sexuality through her body and sexual organs.

Irigaray's discussion on the oppression of both female lips reflects a social duality of female subjugation. As has already been discussed, and is evident in many societies, socially acceptable violence has been generally masculinised and has been a weapon used against women in order to silence them. In connecting both sets of women's lips, Irigaray crystallises the notion that oppression of both the mouth (voice) and vagina (sexuality) can often take the same form. Inserting Sexton's "The Kiss" here, brings some more perspective to Irigaray's argument. Violence against the female mouth and lips is the first thing the poem shows the reader. The subsequent passivity and sexualisation of the mouth do not read as unusual, but are woven into the narrative as if they are normal features of a heterosexual love story. The way in which the narrator's mouth is portrayed can be read in a similar vein to Irigaray's piece. Given patriarchal beliefs of the ideal role of women's mouths and vaginas, the lips of Sexton's mouth could be replaced with vaginal lips and its passivity and the actions done to it in the poem would not read as culturally abnormal. Consider, for instance, what the Biblical first man and woman show about the ideal role for a woman's voice and body in marriage. When God discovers Eve and Adam have eaten from the tree he declares to her: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee".²⁶ Firstly, the male deity is saying that the woman must obey the man and essentially be an object of yearning for him so he will return her compulsory desire of him. Secondly, this verse is a prime example of the cultural linkage between both sets of female lips. The male God is punishing a woman, and subjecting her, and all women after, to feel pain in their female organs when giving birth. He is also declaring that the female voice be controlled by a man, and through his own actions, God shows that

inflicting pain on a woman – so essentially violence against women – is an acceptable way to punish her for any disobedience. This has certainly been the cultural interpretation for centuries.

“The Kiss” echoes cultural depictions of heterosexual relationships, and illustrates that an implicit aspect of such a relationship is the woman suffering violence and a loss of expression in terms of her voice and sexuality. Sexton’s narrator does not see a problem with her situation. This seems to show that violence against the female mouth is in some ways culturally expected, but also that not all heterosexual relationships are doomed to pain and female subjugation: rather that the viciousness portrayed is perhaps more expressive of a woman’s relationship with the patriarchy than with an individual man. Multiple Sexton poems mirror this dual idea of violence and the female mouth, and it appears most often in the scenario of a relationship. The poem “Love Song” features a narrator describing her body and features throughout three stanzas. She says there is “an old red hook in her mouth” and that the organ keeps “bleeding”.²⁷ It is noteworthy that the narrator describes her eyes as “gun-metal blue”, which gives her body a sense of agency and implies that she could effectively wield force of her own volition.²⁸ However, the following descriptions of her mouth, alter this perspective and paint her as a passive receiver of violence, with the notion of a “hook” being particularly disturbing. Bloodshed and cruelty seem inextricably tied up with images of the female mouth, and the mouth is consistently portrayed as the receptor of violence.

Sexton’s poem, “The Sickness Unto Death”, sees the female mouth become a weapon, but only in terms of destroying the self. This Kierkegaard-inspired poem

addresses severe inner turmoil and despair, with the narrator feeling that God has left her body and that she is a “defaced altar”.²⁹ She says she cannot even touch an orange, for God is inside it and she “could not touch what did not belong” to her.³⁰ After describing her body and Godless state in lurid detail, she cries that she cannot even eat bread, and so she turns her mouth on herself, “I ate myself, / bite by bite”.³¹ Whilst the narrator has been reduced to this action as she cannot consume any other sustenance, there is also the fact that she has been driven to this by the absence of her God. The reader is never told why God has left the narrator’s body, so there is no surety that her situation is of her own making. There is the sense that she is punishing her flesh by eating herself, and this is reinforced by the emergence of a derisive Christ. Once the narrator has seemingly fully eaten herself, she says “Jesus stood over me looking down / and He laughed to find me gone”.³² It would seem her mouth is still left, as Christ then places his mouth against the narrator’s and gives her “His air”.³³ This intervention of a higher power seems enough to save the narrator. The poem ends three lines after the new breath, with the narrator giving a “yellow daisy” to the “crazy woman in the next bed”.³⁴

Sexton’s poem charts a person’s salvation, but also shows religious power dynamics, with the female narrator in a vulnerable position. Before aiding the narrator, Christ looks down at her suffering and bloody remains and *laughs*. He is placed as physically and morally above her, but this response is not one befitting a benevolent being, it is cruel. This unkindness finds reflection throughout the narrative. The woman is feeling religious despair and is driven to turn her mouth against herself in an obviously agonising action. Instead of using her mouth to rage and holler as the tormented males do, such as Shakespeare’s Lear, Homer’s Achilles and Hugo’s Javert,

she opts to punish her own flesh. This urge not to use her voice, or even use her mouth to attack others, indicates her own internalisation of patriarchal mouth expectations – she is silencing herself with her own organ of speech. She is painfully punishing herself with her own mouth – she is the God to her Eve. When the narrator is finally given salvation, it is from the mouth of the son of God: another male entity. This clearly shows the expected passivity of a female mouth: she should use it to hurt herself before using it to question authority. Salvation also comes to her mouth from that of another: hers is only good as a passive receptor. She cannot create or voice her own salvation.

**“I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with
cotton.**

When they free me, I am beaded with tears.”³⁵

Dickinson’s No. 293 “I got so I could take his name” shows, in just one line, how even inhaling – the necessary action for voice – is difficult for a female narrator. The narrative shows a woman who has made progress in the wake of an emotional upheaval, an event which involved a “him”. She says she is able to touch his letters once again, and in that same stanza she describes her breaths as “staples – driven through” (12). Once again, the imagery used around the female body is both visceral and violent. It is certainly used to convey the sorrow the narrator has been feeling regarding the man, but it is also a violent concept, especially as the staples are being driven into her own body. Dickinson’s composition also echoes the action described: the rhythm is abrupt, and the cut-off breath from the dash is almost brutal. The mention of letters at the

beginning of the stanza brings forward connotations of words and voice. This connection makes the narrator's agonising inhalation seem particularly haunting. She cannot even breathe without severe pain so how on earth could she possibly speak without dying? Another point to consider is that the narrator has a box full of letters from a man: he has been able to express himself multiple times and convey meaning to another person, but the narrator cannot begin the process of simple speech without extreme discomfort. Whilst this poem does not strictly reference the mouth, it opens up another side of discussion around the difficulty of using the mouth to express a voice, and thus possess some form of agency.

Sexton's poem, "Words", shows a narrator who is able to use her mouth to speak, without the pain Dickinson's narrator felt. However, whilst the narrator says, "I am in love with words", she goes on to say, "so often they fail me".³⁶ It does not seem that the narrator is trying to express sentiments that are beyond words, but rather that the words themselves are not fit for her purpose. She laments, "the words aren't good enough, / the wrong ones kiss me. / Sometimes I fly like an eagle / but with the wings of a wren".³⁷ The metaphor shows that not only is the absence of proper words impeding her self-expression, but it is hindering her independence – the words are not sufficient to keep her airborne or free. So, even though she is able to use words, they are not enough. The narrator is bound by the masculine language, which will not allow her words to express her female experience. Instead, she must piece together the linguistic scraps allowed her by the patriarchy, and try to form something resembling her thoughts and emotions.

Dickinson's No. 237 "I think just how my shape will rise" extends this concept of unfit language, and shows a narrator whose mouth and voice are failing her. The poem is in four stanzas and addresses a female narrator wanting forgiveness from another. She imagines her ascent to heaven, as she believes she will not be forgiven before then. In the first two stanzas, the narrator envisions how her body will look and act during ascension. Her "hair" and "eyes" and "timid head" will rise (3). The narrator does not wax about the ascension of her soul, but instead describes it in "curiously physical terms", using body details to show the reader this woman's physical being slowly rising into the clouds.³⁸ With the second stanza comes the mouth, and the narrator says, "I think just how my lips will weigh – / With shapeless – quivering – prayer" (5-6). The lips are the only bodily detail mentioned in these four lines, which means they demand more attention than the body parts mentioned in quick succession in the previous stanza. The prior mention of hair, eyes and head shows that the mouth is firmly rooted in the female body, and is an important part of that body as it has its own stanza. There is a noticeable contrast between the body parts in the two stanzas: the woman, her hair, eyes and head will *rise* but her lips will *weigh*. The logical extension is that her lips are more sinful than her other aspects. Her rising head is described as "timid", a word which shows the desirable demure humility of a nineteenth century puritan woman.³⁹ The narrator's lips have no such words implying they belong to a good Christian girl, and whatever it is they have done is making them unfit for heaven. This shows that if the female mouth is used in ways not matching the cultural beliefs and standards of their location, the mouth will be judged and deemed unsuitable of joy or reward within that cultural structure. The lips are "quivering" with the

utterance of “shapeless” prayers, but still they are dragging down the body: the prayers do not seem enough.

This poem was originally written on a sheaf of paper which included No. 236 “If He dissolve – then – there is nothing – more”, itself a poem of intense rejection and lack of hope. The fact that the two poems are linked in this way has led to the second one, “I think just how my shape will rise”, being critically overlooked and lumped in the section of ‘pathos filled early writing of an emotional woman’. Both works are seen as Dickinson lamenting over her relationship, or lack thereof, with Samuel Bowles.⁴⁰ Whilst the narrator is certainly upset over her relationship with another person, reading this as Dickinson biography, once again, detracts from further meanings and insights the poem might contain. It could easily be read that the narrator is in fact seeking the forgiveness of a higher power.

The narrator talks to a “you” in the following line, a “you” whom she says is considering her “so late” “the sparrow of [their] care” (7-8). This has been read as Dickinson talking to Samuel Bowles, with her reiterating the perceived lateness of the forgiveness she is seeking.⁴¹ The sparrows seem undoubtedly a reference to Matthew’s Gospel. The passage in question reads, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father”.⁴² From this, we essentially garner the low value of sparrows, but also that even those creatures, which are so common and cheap, cannot die without the will of God. Bearing Dickinson’s reference in mind, the narrator’s comparing herself to a sparrow is her declaring her insignificance. In most versions of this poem, and Johnson’s version from which this analysis is conducted, the word “sparrow” is italicised, given double inverted commas

and has a capital 'S'. As discussed in 'The Breast' chapter, Dickinson gives the reader grammatical clues which can signal a cleverly acerbic and sarcastic angle. This, again, shows her twisting the patriarchal language to form her own unique meanings. From this it seems the narrator is, in fact, saying that she is viewed as not valuable by another – she does not think it herself. I would actually read this stanza as not addressing a mortal, but God. Matthew 10:29 makes clear that God is the one whose “care” sparrows would be under, and the narrator is discussing her fitness for heaven in this stanza, so it flows better that she would be addressing the entity who rules heaven. That the narrator speaks to this other person, whom I propose is God, saying his consideration of her for his care is “so late”, shows how neglected and beyond his care she has felt until this moment. “Care” is also capitalised, which seems to point at the narrator’s not viewing it as wholly wonderful and desirous. This reading feels reinforced by the fact that the narrator’s lips are not as willingly accepted into heaven as is her “timid head” (3).

One of the most important aspects of the mouth in this poem seems to be that it is rooted very firmly in the female body. This is a thematic aspect of many Dickinson and Sexton poems which address the mouth. When the mouth is clearly female, it does not achieve agency or independent, painless self-expression. There is definitely the exception of Dickinson’s first poem, “She dealt her pretty words like blades”, but as discussed, that poem is powerful and unique because it does not conform to the culture around it. In “I think just how my shape will rise”, the narrator’s mouth drags her back from heaven – it is the bodily part which is deemed unfit. The unanswered prayers it recites illustrate the unheard and unsuccessful voice of the narrator. I would argue that the entirety of the poem could be read as a narrator asking forgiveness from God for

something she has said or done with her mouth. But she knows she will not receive it until she dies, and even then her mouth may exclude her from it altogether. The poem ends with the woman's heart thudding to the floor "unshriven" (16), so she is effectively dead but still not forgiven. It appears unclear as to whether the narrator was able to ascend to that heavenly realm. However, it is certain that her mouth was judged for its deportment during her terrestrial existence.

All but one of the poems discussed thus far show the female mouth failing to escape from its traditional position beneath the boot of the patriarchy. Cultural beliefs regarding the value of women's voices, and existing within a world whose signsⁱⁱ and experiences are defined by the language of the 'oppressor', all restrain the mouths of the female narrators. The language is not fit for their purpose. The prayers their lips utter are not heard or heeded. Words fail them, so rather than flying free on an air current of linguistic expression, they are plummeting with failing wings. In other cases, the effort to even begin forming words, words the narrators know will be cause for pain or punishment, is too much and too agonising even to endeavour. Instead of attempting to use and adapt a language the mouths know is not for them, they would rather be passive or self-destructive. Irigaray's thesis on the duality of female lips can be read in both Sexton's and Dickinson's poetry. Paula Bennett asserts that Dickinson's poetry found "another kind of power in being a woman (in having vaginal lips as well as oral lips)".⁴³ This came from the poet using her poetry as homoerotic and autoerotic in a time where she was "sexually and poetically disempowered by the society in which she lived".⁴⁴ The presence of this thought in Dickinson's poetry, and the clear parallels

ⁱⁱ In the Saussurean sense.

between both sets of lips in Sexton's poems, creates female narrators who illustrate that their sexual expressions are subject to the same level of restriction as their vocal utterances.

Sexton's poem, "Killing the Love" features a female narrator who experiences the drawbacks of her gendered mouth. The mouth does not care; it is angry. This poem appears in the posthumously released collection, *The Divorce Papers*. Fittingly, the poem is frothing at the mouth, it is spitting acid, anger and death. The poem opens with a line of resounding finality: "I am the love killer".⁴⁵ The piece is loosely structured, putting more emphasis on visceral images rather than tight, even lines. The first stanza is the longest, at sixteen lines, and witnesses the narrator murdering all memories of herself with her lover. She pushes "knives" through their entwined hands and slaughters "the music [they] thought so special".⁴⁶ These savage lines build up the tension, and toward the end of the stanza the narrator deals her most intimate and violent line, saying, "I am stuffing your mouth with your / promises and watching / you vomit them out upon my face".⁴⁷ There is a twisted irony here, a sick echo of the beginning of a relationship where a lover might whisper sweet promises upon the face of his partner, but now she is turning those promises against him, so forcefully that he cannot help but gag. This line comes several lines after she says, "I am murdering me, where I kneeled at your kiss".⁴⁸ The contrast between the power positions, one during the relationship and one at the end of it, is drastic. She "kneeled" at his kiss when they were first together; his mouth made her drop to the physical position synonymous with submission and docility. Now she is evidently no longer in love with him, she faces him and forces the promises his mouth made back into him. Her choice of the word "stuffing" implies there are an abundance of wrongs his mouth has done, a wealth of

bad promises. The word also gives the image of filling a receptacle; she is the dominant one in this action. However, this is short-lived, as he regurgitates the words out “upon” her face. It seems she was allowed her short moment of power, of treating his mouth as he had treated hers, but for that action there must be a repercussion. The fact that he retches “upon” her face implies that her face is upturned, which takes us back to the narrator being on her knees – below him. Power also seems to be taken away from her in this section, as the target is not just her lips or mouth but her whole face. This seems to show that she must have more flesh hurt than him: she acts on his mouth, so he retaliates against her mouth *and* face.

Even though the voice of “Killing the Love” is fuelled by anger, the female narrator and her mouth do not escape unscathed. Although the whole piece seems to be about taking oneself back after a relationship implosion, and repossession of one’s narrative, the narrator’s mouth and body cannot inflict violence against the male character without suffering. She cannot sink a knife into his hand, it is both of their hands which must feel the blade. However, once the mouth and lips are involved it seems the narrator is worse off than the male lover; she murders herself due to her reaction to his kiss, and when she tries to punish his mouth it is her whole face which suffers. Sexton’s and Dickinson’s mouths discussed, when they are clearly female, do not seem capable of fighting back or being heard without their whole body being hurt. Even the narrator in Dickinson’s “She dealt her pretty words like blades” cannot escape; whilst inside the poem she is ruthless and unscathed, outside the poem she seems universally judged as a cruel and nasty woman.

**“Nobody cheers for the avenging lady, unless she is
fighting the bitch-monster who threatens her
babies.”⁴⁹**

In the poetry analysed here, the mouth is consistently a site of violence – it makes opaque the patriarchal silencing of the female body and experience. Constant bloody imagery shows the time-honoured methods used by the patriarchy to mute the self-expression and narratives of women and minorities. “The Sickness Unto Death” shows the internalisation of centuries worth of othering and silencing, with the female mouth turning on the female body, intent on destroying it for the wrongs it allegedly committed. Both poets also show how the mouth and voice are muzzled by a language which was not designed for them, and was kept out of their reach for much of history. Dickinson’s metaphor of “staples” shows just how painful the voice restrictions could feel. The Biblical images, which arise in pieces by both Sexton and Dickinson, show a male dominated religion written by and in the words of men. This serves to remind the reader of the place and value of women’s bodies and expression in the Western world from which both poets wrote.

Bennett writes of Dickinson’s heterosexual love poem narrators, saying that they “demonstrat[e] all too effectively how Western sexual arrangements and the discourse in which they are embodied have helped mold women psychologically to embrace and identify with weakness, lack and pain”.⁵⁰ This also applies to the Sexton heterosexual love poems in this chapter. The self-infliction of violence and the recurring motif of bloody lips in Sexton’s poems, show the female mouth being commonly identified with

pain and deficiency. Dickinson does not have as many clear images of blood on mouths, however, the surfeit of brutal imagery around voice, the hopeless language around narrators' self-expression, and the fact that lips are often "buckled" clearly shows the social manipulations Bennett identifies.

Dickinson's "She dealt her pretty words like blades" unites the mouth with female expression and non-self-inflicted violence. The narrator shows us a female mouth defying those social edicts of passivity and weakness. She illustrates how women are kept from powerful self-expression. The reactions to the piece confirm that it is socially shocking to see a woman use her self-expression for violence – we are accustomed to her being the victim of it, not the perpetrator. The character also shows us, that even if a woman can combine the two things, she will not be well liked for it.

¹ Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 106.

² Anne Sexton, *The Death Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 21.

³ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 629.

⁴ Robert Weisbuch, 'Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go', in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle and Christanne Miller (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 197-223 (p. 210).

⁵ Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 41; Richard Benson Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 211.

⁶ Paglia, p. 629.

⁷ Mary Beard, *Women & Power* (London: Profile Books, 2017), p. 17.

⁸ Beard, p. 9

⁹ Beard, p. 11.

¹⁰ Beard, p. 53.

¹¹ Beard, p. 54.

¹² Beard, p. 62.

¹³ Judith Baxter, 'Introduction', in *Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts*, ed. by Judith Baxter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1- 18 (p. 17).

¹⁴ Anneke Smelik, 'And the Mirror Cracked. Metaphors of Violence in the Films of Marleen Gorris', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16 (1993), 349–63 <[https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(93\)90026-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(93)90026-6)>

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together', trans. by Carolyn Burke, *Signs*, 6.1 (1980), 69–79 (p. 69).

¹⁶ Anne Sexton, *Love Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 2.

¹⁷ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.

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- ¹⁸ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ²⁰ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 1.
- ²¹ Sexton, *Love Poems*, p. 2.
- ²² Irigaray, pp. 72-73.
- ²³ Irigaray, p. 72.
- ²⁴ Carolyn Burke, 'Introduction to Luce Irigaray's "When Our Lips Speak Together"', *Signs*, 6.1 (1980), 66-68 (p. 67).
- ²⁵ Irigaray, p. 73.
- ²⁶ Genesis 3.10.
- ²⁷ Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 21.
- ²⁸ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 21.
- ²⁹ Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 41.
- ³⁰ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 40.
- ³¹ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 41.
- ³² Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 41.
- ³³ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 41.
- ³⁴ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 41.
- ³⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 31.
- ³⁶ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 71.
- ³⁷ Sexton, *The Awful Rowing*, p. 71.
- ³⁸ Faith Priscilla Barrett, 'Letters to the World: Emily Dickinson and the Lyric Address' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 2000), p. 75.
- ³⁹ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 2.
- ⁴⁰ Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 107.
- ⁴¹ David Preest, 'Emily Dickinson Commentary', (2012), 1-529
<<http://www.emilydickinsonpoems.org>> [accessed 1 August 2019], p. 74.
- ⁴² Matthew 10.29.
- ⁴³ Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), p. 155.
- ⁴⁴ Bennett, p. 155.
- ⁴⁵ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 529.
- ⁴⁶ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 529.
- ⁴⁷ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 529.
- ⁴⁸ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 529.
- ⁴⁹ Carina Chocano 'We Have a Heroine Problem', in *Nasty Women: Feminism, Resistance, and Revolution in Trump's America*, ed. by Samhita Mukhopadhyay, Kate Harding and Bahni Turpin (Connecticut: Tantor, 2017), pp. 45-57 (p. 52).
- ⁵⁰ Bennett, p. 161.

Conclusion

**“Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton,
who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a
barrage of attacks along the way because of the
flamboyance of her subject matter...”¹**

**“The methods, the exclusions, of Emily Dickinson’s
existence could not have been my own; yet more and
more, as a woman poet finding my own methods, I have
come to understand her necessities, could have been
witness in her defense.”²**

The analysis of Dickinson’s and Sexton’s poems throughout these chapters, shows the hardship of living in a body gendered female. It is a body which is constantly judged on its appearance. It is a body whose society deems it most desirable when it is quiet and confined. It is also a body which should be constantly sexually attractive. Each poet has pieces where the female narrators celebrate their bodies and their womanhood, such as “In Celebration of My Uterus”, No. 214 “I taste a liquor never brewed” and No. 249 “Wild nights – Wild nights!” (the latter being generally read as regarding the love between two women). But these celebrations take place when the narrator is with

another woman or in a setting which is outside gendered, social interaction, essentially when they are beyond the male gaze.

Sexton's piece, "Woman with Girdle" is a simple poem describing the removal of a shape-control garment. This piece feels unique and refreshing as it shows the reader a woman's naked body away from the male gaze – she is undressing alone, and her actions and features are written by a female poet. The woman's nipples are described as being "as uninvolved / as warm starfish".³ Her belly is "as soft as pudding", her hips are "head cushions / and mouth cushions" and her knees are "like saucers".⁴ Sexton has portrayed a human body: there are no judgements in her lines. It is the body of a human being: there is no sexual intent evidentⁱ and still this is a body worth writing about and worth looking at. The piece then becomes a metaphor. The woman is removing a garment which is meant to compress her 'unattractive' extra flesh. The girdle is not a comfortable garment, but this does not matter. All that is important is that she will be closer to her contemporaneous female beauty standards, and thus be more sexually attractive to men. Seeing the removal of the garment is like seeing this woman remove the socially constructed body constraints placed on her. When she is without the girdle, when her imperfect body is uncovered, she is still worth writing about; there are still metaphors and similes for her body which do not need to be sexual in nature to be evocative and effective.

When the female narrators are described in poems with men, or they are clearly enmeshed in the patriarchal world, the narratives are very different from the

ⁱ I do not believe a reader could construe starfish or cushions as being within the patriarchy's definition of a sexually attractive woman.

aforementioned pieces. The poems show how hard it is to exist in a female body. From Dickinson's time, to Sexton's, and before them and after them, female bodies have been told to be quiet, shy of movement and constantly open to sexualisation. Our breasts and sexuality are constructed, packaged and auctioned off, our hands are tied, our voice boxes are silenced, and our lips are painted prettily for the men around us. Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, Sylvia Blood and Iris Marion Young have shown the restrictions Western culture place upon women's bodies: from body weight, to pubic hair, to swinging a baseball bat, the patriarchy is a constant presence, both inside our own skulls and in the actions of our societies. The ideal version of femininity saturates books, magazines, films, billboards and video games. Women are told to meet this impossibly high, and often contradictory standard: they are told if they meet it, they will be happy and beautiful and loved. Those who do not meet this ideal, which I would assume is over 99% of the female population, are socially punished. Sexton's narrators were incarcerated, dismembered and forced to hurt themselves. Dickinson's narrators were dubbed cruel and hard-hearted, their bodies were defeated and subjected to intense pain. All this hardship inflicted in the effort to make the narrators 'proper' women and punish them for their disobediences.

These poems also show women's bodies as objects, objects belonging to men. Many of Sexton's narratives have a female body which appears void and flat, and must be constructed, handled and breathed into by a man for it to have meaning and life. Dickinson writes female narrators who are rendered immobile by the constraints their societies place upon them. They are often not entitled to power, or speech that is not prayer, and even through the language of their experience, the social restraints are nigh on opaque, and certainly smothering. But it is precisely these narratives of oppression

from which we see fight and hope emerge. The narrator of “The Touch” needs the help of another to reclaim her hand and thus her haptic experience from its patriarchal imprisonment, but once she is free, she keeps herself free, and creates her own supernatural and extravagant story. Her hand is “alive all over America”, and not even death can stem her power.⁵ Dickinson’s narrator in “It was given to me by the Gods” has a power those around her would confiscate if they discovered it. She hides it in her hand and does not eat or sleep for fear of detection. Her existence seems perhaps sad and lonely, but it is clear by the end that there is a fire raging inside her. This mysterious power the narrator possesses, inspires her as the poem goes on, and at the close she declares herself different and “bold” (16). She embraces her power, and the reader can see her marching beyond the borders of the poem, to go forth boldly and give grief to anyone attempting to stop her. Dickinson’s “Rearrange a Wife’s affection!” sees a female narrator fully encircled by social expectations of femininity, and discusses how pain and wifhood were synonymous for many women of the nineteenth century. But the narrator fights back through linguistic creativity, a method which shows she is not blindly obedient, and also involves her using word deftness and trickery – another behaviour not encouraged for women in that time period. Thus, the narrator reclaims her voice and bodily experience. From small and hushed, to big and flashy, many of the female narrators have their victories.

Narrators in Sexton’s “The Sickness Unto Death”, “You, Doctor Martin” and Dickinson’s “I took my power in my hand” and “I think just how my shape will rise”, are less than successful in reclaiming their bodies and voices from the patriarchal surroundings. However, they do try. We see them grappling with their situations, but their bodies are held back and stifled by those who do not wish them to own their bodies

or their female power. Whilst they are not victorious within the poems, the narrators still achieve several things. They show the reader their plight, in emotive and often gut-wrenching bodily detail. The effect of this body-based, visceral language enables the reader to feel for them and feel ourselves in their places. The styles and forms of the poems also reinforce this bodily impact. Dickinson's dashes and line breaks create rhythms where the reader can almost hear the breath of the narrator, nearly feel the warm whisper in their ear. Sexton's rhythms and run-on lines often evoke movement, and emulate the nature and behaviour of the action or body part to which the poems relate. This means we are both next to and inside the narrator, we want to help them, and they make us want to try harder for body and gender equality in the world outside the poems.

**“There is something rather curious, rather queer, about
the way in which we divide our human and social worlds
into two supposedly discrete categories.”⁶**

Both poets show the pain of being in a female body, and this extends to the hardship of being in a gendered body when you are outside the patriarchal language and power structure. The patriarchy has a place for obedient and conforming women in its power structure: it is always a menial and lesser position, but there is still a place. Bartky talks about the women who are ostracized by the patriarchy for not even attempting to conform – and cast out even if they are physically unable to conform. In the narratives from Dickinson and Sexton we can see the extreme adversity arising from being cast

out and dubbed “other”. Adrienne Rich created the term “compulsory heterosexuality”.⁷ This concept highlights that all those who do not belong to the heterosexual, gender binary are going against the patriarchy. They are rebelling against this “compulsory” notion of gender and attraction, and are thus othered and open to socially acceptable discrimination. Anyone who identifies as LGBTQIA, gender-fluid or gender non-binary or otherwise outside the binary,ⁱⁱ is separate from the gender “norm” as dictated by the patriarchy, and they are immediately outside the power structure. We can see this in Foucault’s statement that homosexuality was “invented” in the nineteenth century. His point is that, by creating an “other”, the patriarchy had a tool to deem people outside the norm, and thus subject those people to legal and social punishment.⁸ Through showing the damage done by a gendering patriarchy, Dickinson and Sexton’s poetry seems to suggest that anyone who is not a conforming, white, cisgendered, able-bodied man suffers from being gendered.

This reading is reflected in many Dickinson and Sexton poems, but perhaps most clearly in “Consorting with Angels” and No. 443 “I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl”. The narrator in Sexton’s “Consorting with Angels” begins her narrative saying, “I was tired of being a woman”, then in the third line she says, “tired of my mouth and my breasts”.⁹ Now, having analysed both body parts of which she speaks, it seems clear she is declaring her weariness of all that is socially and culturally attached to a female body with a mouth and breasts. The narrator is tired of the hardship which comes from the way the patriarchy says she should be treated, due to her gender. She says she is “tired of the gender things”, making very clear her stance.¹⁰ For the entirety of this first

ⁱⁱ For instance, cisgendered men who do not conform to the patriarchy’s masculinity requirements.

stanza, she is very unhappy; shackled to her gender she is tired and sad. This all changes, however, and the narrator leaves the earthly realm and loses her “common gender”.¹¹ Without her enforced femininity she is happy: she proclaims that she is “beautiful” and is “all one skin like a fish”.¹² Whilst it does not appear this narrator achieved her gender freedom on Earth, it is still crystal clear that beyond the pain and mundanity of prescribed gender, there is happiness.

Dickinson’s “I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl” looks at the performativity of gender and shows exactly how patriarchally prescribed her life is. As the first line suggests, the narrator spends much of the piece describing the actions she does as a woman, what she calls “Life’s little duties” (2). As the poem continues, it becomes evident that the narrator has little heart for what she is doing, and that her actions are not of her own choice. She is “simulat[ing]” the actions of a socially acceptable woman, and we see that she must do this, because there is a “bomb” and it is at her “bosom” (27-28). For the second half of the piece, the narrator begins to speak in first person plural, so the bomb is actually poised on the bosoms of multiple women, which darkens the narrative and shows that gender is certainly the central issue. If the women “hold it” and are “calm”, then it seems they will not be blown to pieces (29). The final three-line stanza begins, “Therefore – we do life’s labor –” (30), showing that if the women continue to do their menial tasks, continue to be obedient, then no one will be harmed.

It seems quite evident that both Dickinson’s and Sexton’s narrator understood the oppressive nature of patriarchal gender roles, and by their wishes to escape, we can see that they did not agree with the gender status quo. This perhaps points at the reason none of either poets’ narrators could successfully denounce or escape from the

patriarchy. Whilst they were gendered and placed into that binary categorisation, they could not be free. The only hope for freedom then lies in the removal of patriarchal notions of prescribed and enforced gender.

The second part of this thesis is my creative work – the bomb in my own bosom, if you will – and there is a very specific reason for its subject matters and for its poetic form. The aim of the work is to show emotions and human bodies: it is to show the narratives of people who are not empowered by the patriarchy. The narratives and stories are to show how much further there is to go, but also that there is hope. Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton have breathed a new life into my fingers and page. They caused me to embrace new styles of poetry, and not be coy about writing uncomfortable or personal details. Their poetry has given me courage and the drive to share stories that show the need for change. Reading about their lives, and the trouble they encountered for being “female poets”, or, heaven forbid, “poetesses” has inspired this collection to be fiercely female. The following poems want to join the voices of those female poets who have struggled for the power, ability and means to be able to write. They have paved the way, for women like me to be believed when we say, “I am a poet”.

Dickinson’s and Sexton’s work, with its endurance and relevance, has also highlighted the power of words and just telling human stories, and particularly from the perspective of those often silenced. After all, the more narratives of women, people of colour, minorities and LGBTQIA there are in the world, the better. We will flood the patriarchal narrative with our bodies, our own narratives, and our humanity, gain

momentum as we inspire more voices, and make sure our story is one they will have to tell.

¹ Maxine Kumin, 'Introduction', in *Complete Poems*, by Anne Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. i-xxxiv (p. xxxiv).

² Adrienne Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 99-121 (p. 100).

³ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 70.

⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 70.

⁵ Anne Sexton, *Love Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 1.

⁶ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th edn (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 220.

⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1986).

⁸ Bennett and Royle, p. 221.

⁹ Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 17.

¹⁰ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 17.

¹¹ Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 18.

¹² Sexton, *Live or Die*, p. 18.

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We Wash
Our Hands
in Fire

A Poetry Collection by Dadon Rowell

I burn the way money burns

Anne Sexton, "The Breast"

Confession

You tell me girls don't mean what they say
I tell you I'm tired
that my knees & back are tangled & stiff
from holding your god
beneath my breastbone

I outlived your father, your son
sliced their bones with my tears
but you bite the moon
& use my skin for a prayer book

Persephone

I am a woman in a room of dead flowers

& I don't know

what to do

so

I eat carbon dioxide

&

let the petals

fall

My mouth is burning

& you won't give me drink

because

you like how it feels

when your throat drips gin

& the voices in your head

dis

connect

I ask if blue is red

if these are my fingers

I'm breaking off

one by

one

you tell me the snapping

is tiresome

bolt cutters are silent

So I count in my head
the times you held sunshine
in your fist
but shell shatters
in my hand
&

spills

I remember how you spat words
like knives
kicked the bed bloody
the wall purple
said you couldn't change

said you didn't need

to

said daffodils weren't in season anyway

Testament: I

“I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare”

(Ecclesiastes 7:26)

Just call me Jezebel,
my hand is a mousetrap
my lips slick with Noah's wine
drip honey and chains.

I'll make you renounce
your mothers, daughters, wives
as stray dogs
you'll turn them out on the street
to fight rats in the gutter.

And I'll paint your face grey
with old words
from dead men
who thought they could break
me too.

Flotsam

My foot unravels at the ankle
filaments of blood and gold
spin across the sand
you told me our blue shanty
on Paloma beach
was unsinkable
that it would say its Hail Marys
and swallow

Gulls peck at my door
leave white feathers
in your shoes, call me
in cigarette voices to *pull down*
the blood red roses
and leave you in the longboat
till we're sober

Pebbles drip from my eyes
bounce off seams
choking my hands, my breasts
where you pulled out the glass

with flat-tip tweezers
and used my wet hair
to thread your mother's needle

You crunch leaves
between your fingers
flick black specks in the air
and climb down my throat
with grey lilies you stole
from her lips

Bees crash at the window
spill yellow down my cheeks
murmur in thick pollen
don't ever take heed
of what pretty boys say
or you'll sink in the salt
& they'll plant daisies in
your eyes

Sundown

You're dressed in bare feet & smoke
a cigarette lounges between your lips
& James is in your half-closed hand

He's a curled petal between your lifeline
& the scar you got from daddy
making you not play with scissors

His breath shivers your mother's gold
glazes your nails with sugar
whispers roses all day long

When the sun drops he grows
& snaps the bones of his cage

House of Paradise

Little girls draw houses like yours
In nursery school,
Three square windows
Rust-red chimney
One door
Six rooms.

The biggest has a fireplace
Thick oak table
Willow-patterned cups
Silver teaspoons.
A portrait of the King.
And the same grey wallpaper as
All the others.

The smallest is
a closet.

A woman in white is crumpled there
Between old sheets and mothballs
She's roped with lilies
A bible clamped between her teeth.

You open it every nine months
For the babies to crawl out.

Eden

Eat me,
bite the apple from my throat,
tear my red tongue in half
and use my hands as napkins

Drink me,
split my torso down the middle
and let the wine from my veins
water your teeth

Burn me,
use the splintered bone
to scratch out my sisters
my mothers

Just tell me you love me

Vessel

They looked up your skirt
and declared you a girl.
So they dressed you in pink,
put wool in your ears
and sat you on a nursery shelf
to wait for a boy.

You pulled out hair,
filled your stockings with blood
and sharpened your nails
to scrape off the parts
which weren't you.

They clamped your legs crossed,
sewed on a wig,
said good girls fold their hands,
said they'd pull out your voice
if you twitched.

You used a magnifying glass
to burn holes in your chest
let your insides
crawl out
and breathe air.

So they sealed your body –
vacuum packed your mouth, your breasts

and filled you with vinegar
to preserve your womb.

Play House

Flowers bloom on her arms
a string of rust violets
to pluck and arrange on the nightstand

Carpet runs down the stairs
slips near the bottom and
tangles jammed in a heap by the door

The walls are bright
but the yellow paper is bubbled and scratched
where Charlotte's fingers stab out
and point at you

Testament: II

“If she shall bear a maid child, she shall be unclean two weeks”

(Leviticus 12:5)

Married women don't
get naked –
your damp skin was a taunt, a dare
an invitation,
you skewered your husband
with bare arms,
proud breasts,
and the silver on your hips.

And when the king kills your man
you marry him.

But at least he wipes his boots
before coming to bed,
at least his other wives are nice,
at least he finishes
quick.

Things we tried to bury

We thought we could forget

the hands

the sweat

the stink of teenage boys

who thought *no* meant *yes*

thought skin meant sex

thought being alone in an empty park

meant fair game

have a go

slap her if she moves

We thought we could forget

the time we saw

what you lookin' at bitch

turn into split lips

and teeth on tarmac

thought bullies stayed at school

and you could always call *III*

We thought we could forget

God hates gays

only girls bleed

toughen up

being locked in closets

till we turned blue

or they got bored

and threw away the key

We thought we could forget
wooden spoons
between our teeth
sparks flooding our skulls
our arms
thought we could untwist
our synapses
sew ourselves back
up
from jellied cells
and fingernails

We thought we could forget
the man in Manhattan
who owns our knees
the couple in Moscow
who rent our spines
and the boardroom in Riyadh
who control our hips
and clean their hands
on our cheeks

Medical Background

They took my grandmother's womb
when she was 75
just in case

She cried when she woke up
and heard her home of five babies
was on a street corner
with someone's old hip
& a dead appendix

They drugged my great-grandmother
& gave her a hysterectomy

Told her she should be grateful
there'd be no more children

I'm sure she was pleased
during her next twenty years
on the floor
in bed
her face permanent
baby's-breath

They told my mother she could only give birth
to blood clots & pain
no foetus would stand a chance
without grappling hook

or harness

And wouldn't it be safer
to just pull it all out now?

She cradled three pulses
grew our feet and fingernails,
gave us her father's knees
& her mama's spine

Billboard Woman

We could drive a Cadillac
down her thighs
and have an empty tank
before we reached
the left knee.

Her lips are blood poppies
tied in a lush smirk,
her cheekbones push up
ready to cut.

Her skin is chalk and alabaster
high breasts with
carnation nipples
bob and pout at me.

We could be prospectors
searching for pores
or dimples,
but find only
unstretched satin
and bald playdough.

Cliché

You let in pretty little girls
with their pink palms and wet eyes
to watch you write
and pace
and swear
you growl smoke then tug their plaits and say
you'll make them stars

They've seen your name
in typewriter font on bestseller lists
inside dustjackets of sexy, new anthologies
tattooed on the wrist of the brunette
with black pantyhose and babydoll
who tried to fix you
but got the centrefold instead

It's always the same
extra tuition, got promise and the like
an antique Chesterfield in the office
hushed stairwells after dark
tweed marks on doe-eyed flesh
and recycled sonnets clutched in budding hands

When their skin is the dry paper
of your forthcoming collection
and their sweat and whispered love
won't oil your comb-over

you go home –
to your wife and two children.

Because you couldn't take me home

You have your kettle, your coat
your pair of tan shoes,
you made a glory box from my ribs
laced up with white
for her to unknot and spread
in the house built for two

You twist my hands into playgrounds,
fingers are seesaws for
your future tadpoles,
my veins pink and blue ribbons
to weave in their hair

And when they're over five feet
you'll give them a string of my teeth
to wear at
funerals and parties

**Your ovary is the size of an almond, it can grow a cyst the size of your open
hand**

It is probably just muscle strain.

she whimpers at night
tucks herself under tubes
so they can't see in

Does it hurt when I poke here?

her mouth fills
with blood, chokes
her voice

Rate it on a scale of one to ten.

twenty
thirty
f i f t y
f u u u c k

Scans cost the taxpayer.

she's twisting
hissing
scratching red walls
needing

out

We will put you on the waiting list.

she coughs on bile
and codeine
they don't listen when she screams
fucking get me
out

Waiting.

she remembers

laughing

Waiting.

she remembers

sex

Waiting.

she remembers

splitting

skin

crack

ling

steak knives

twisting

We did not see anything.

she's retching

reaching

through bloody membrane

for hips

kidneys

a liver

to hold her hand

We will make an exploratory incision.

Though a hysterectomy would be a permanent solution

Wolf Whistle

The rabbit in

my chest is saying they all want to hurt

me

stick thick fingers in my soul

they go past in cars buses walking too

close behind beside inside

their eyes say it's too

late

 they have guns dogs they got my
address

from the milk carton while we slept

my right foot says I can run fast

the left closes its eyes and pulls the blanket higher

 their white teeth & pale faces

swim

through tarmac stand next to me tell me

lie down

let them walk across my
belly

take an evening stroll through my legs

 tie my ankles into bows and leave me in the

 gutter for next
time

Lakeside

The girl with long hair
sits with a notebook
she touches blue pen to red lips
as though to drink ink
and make poems with her tongue

Apricot clouds swell above her,
two swallows twist and roll
Olympic divers drunk with height,
their sun-soaked voices
slick over the water

Rain spills down her cheeks,
orange leaves fall from her sleeves,
someone sits next to her
without asking, stubs a cigarette
in the vee of her elbow

Mondays trip over Fridays
lichen clambers up her skirts
across her grey knees
the lake sighs, hazes over
and wanders off in the breeze

They build a parking lot around her
pave over her hands,
mouth and wide green eyes

they bury her hair in white paint and park the Jag
across her stomach in spring.

We are burning our bones

But you come
dressed in sulphur
& build power stations
around us

Can't you let us die?

You stuff our jawbones
with neutrons
turn our veins into sieves
& paint pigs' blood on our lips

We have lizard tongues
& tiger breath
we roar flames
but you stuff our throats
with lead

We want to die

Starvation is not fire
but we stop eating
because our ribs & hips
need out

You produce funnels
& tubes

but photons aren't food
& the water is thick
with dead cats
so you feed us our teeth instead

We need to die

We need to die
so we can build our *own* bones
make them thick as Greek pillars

We will wrap our hands in calcium thorns
& make you
crawl

Amphitheatre for two

My hair is turning into snakes
because I want you

to be stone

you sit with popcorn
& stare

I strip off my face
put on the mask –
gentleman's choice of course –
the one with butterflies and frogs

I cartwheel
fan kick
& make balloon animals

your eyes

lips

mouth

don't move

I can see through
to the back of your skull

At university we learnt to say
#not all men
but sometimes it is

all men

because if it isn't
if we make exceptions
then those Grecian heroes come along
with mirror shields
& tell us it isn't so bad
tell us to smile more

you join their ranks
tell me to
dance
harder
& fuck catharsis

But my knees hurt

I can't dance and hold your world
on my back

anymore

We're Sorry

(lyrics included from *I'll Say Goodbye (Even Though I'm Blue)*
by The Exponents)

we lie in bed but our eyes / won't close / our fingers
splay out & reach / for the moon / but it's too cold and
our hands go / blue / the song clangs *I'll say goodbye*
even though / maybe we'll paint the ceiling / orange /
the day we cut our hair / but tonight it's white to
match / the ice / in our stomach / *Even though I'm*
blue / even though we asked for this / even though it
was our crackling voice / over the windscreen
wipers / even though we want to peel off / our skin /
& tuck our spine under our clavicles / so we don't
have to be the bitch their mother's call us / as they
bleach down sterile countertops / tuck us into
convenient piles / with toast crumbs & dead flies / *I'll*
say goodbye / so we don't have to live with faces that
turn toward streetlights / we can't bear the tears / *Even*
though I'm blue / we don't have to live with lips that
smash / hearts / *Darlin' I'll say goodbye to you*

It's the first day of spring & I don't love you

On Monday I tell you I ate sunshine for breakfast
you book me a dental appointment.

We pull over because I can't decide where to go
you chose a café eight weeks ago
so we drive past my first three choices

back down the driveway.

The kids next door play
so we shut all the doors and cover our heads with Tupperware.
At night you go down
on me
then ask if I've considered waxing.

It's Friday & there's blood in my tea
you pour in white paint
tell me to stir.

We make the bed & you smell like your mother
I can't turn down corners properly
so we have
to
keep
trying

until I get it right

I put the pillow back
upside down
because I'm not

It's our anniversary so you shout *fuck* at your laptop
put me on standby in the corner

then give rotten-stemmed gerberas
in the morning.

We're on holiday
& you left your vocal chords at home
they're on the coffee table next to
the smiles in Kmart ceramic
& my Lana del Rey CDs.
I collect paua shells
so you can smash them
when the car won't start.

It's midnight & you tell me no
eye contact
it
puts
you off
you massage me like a stress ball.
When we kiss you taste like cold coffee
& oven cleaner.

It's Thursday, there are bees in my eyes
& your hands are so busy with steel strings
bra hooks
knowing the answers before my lips move
that you forget
my assault.

Burn a Body

When you burn a body
it takes twelve hours
bones sigh into ash
and water on your cheek
dries to mist

When you burn a body
it is quiet
you're allowed to weep or chant
never both

When you burn a body
the smoke is crisp and white
like divorce papers
or your mother-in-law's spine

When you burn a body
teeth and fingernails fall
plant themselves in the dirt
and stick in your feet as you leave

When you burn a body
strands of hair float above flames
evening whispers
to someone who loved you more

There's a certain slant of light

Emily Dickinson, "There's a certain slant of light,"

Emily Dickinson taught me how to write a poem

Splatter ink fists
 in the top right
 corner –
 twist your Straight
 lines
 make them
 tumb
 l
 e
 d
 i
 g
 their stanzas
 into Dirt
 & feel the sting of a dash –
 in their wide, Red
 mouths
 spit syntax like B u l l e t s
 use verbs as belts, nooses
 and Birdsong
 make Them believe
 we're wide eyed Wombs
 disguise teeth
 in simile and viole ts

until

it's too –

late

& we've made castles

in

their

bones

What you do after

cut hair

drink whiskey

Single Malt

Chivas Regal XV©

Aged 18 Years

sit next to the Australian couple – he's from Fremantle like dad

go out to the grey corridor behind the restaurant

hear a man whistling

he's leaning against the wall

red stubble and suit trousers that bit too tight

clench,

tight

go into the first stall on the left

turn the lock

hard

look in the small mirror

it's a French film, one of those independent ones where they can say the 'f' word,
have the

camera Dutch tilt and fuck at every angle

head back

hair slides

over shoulders

lips part

just a little, maybe one centimetre

eyes shut

know what the camera would be doing right now

mid sex-scene, close up on face, think Amélie but sadder

Amélie who's tired

Amélie whose thighs are so goddamn tense

Amélie whose brain is a broken window

Amélie who just wants a fucking orgasm

wash and dry hands

make an origami lotus with the paper towel

crumple it in one hand, leave in sink

open the door

make eye contact

hear the needle snap

tell the man with the stubble and brogue

you need more whis

k

e

y

A Poem for my Hips

I lie on my back
on the bedroom floor
stomach hollow and hips high –
solid white churches
Moroccan marble and whalebone –
believers shuffle through –
smear mud along my navel
men in black robes
erect statues of virgins
Michelangelo paints Adam
on the plaster of my bones

Their little fingers nestle between my ribs

In moonlight they are blue thread –
streams for skinny-dipping
for getting lost
for nearly drowning on a Sunday night
when alone except for Corvus and
Cassiopeia

You try to swallow them
but they cry for me
say it's past their bedtime

Even tucked in they stare
each a cyclops with an accusing eye
a curious dove
a kicked dog

They aren't scarred yet
but the doctor said
It runs in the family
and anyway
I could buy new ones these days

To Anne

Were there moments
you lay in bed and shivered at worms
mud that crawled beneath your nails

Your thighs two marble columns
hands clawing for fishing wire
some yellow thread
to maul your palms and
fuse your wrists
but cradle you

above the place
black stockings and gin
pink kisses and apples
are hollowed out by pale snakes
lie dumb as clay ribs
on sour violets

But you split the chord
with your mother's gold ring
told that little red heart to stop stop
when it was trying so hard
to beat monoxide
through your veins
to keep your cheeks blushed
your lips freshly cut

I pull you to my breast
whisper children's names
into your Boston skin
but you tell me
to let your teeth and hands feel dirt
your pointed chin
your freckles
your twelve grey hairs dissolve

You command me don white cotton
fur coat and pearls
and wait for you by the window.

The Affair

She puts on red stockings
oils her hips with a Tom Collins
and sprinkles smoke at the corners of her eyes.

Husband slumps on the couch
faded and beige
his stuffing coming loose at the edges.

She doesn't make herself the tinderbox
doesn't need his spark –
she's already a fire, embers prick her feet.

Perhaps a young poet tonight
who composes constellations
and feeds her metaphors
from the tip of his tongue,
will call her honey, sugar, turtle dove
decorate her toes with diamonds
and set pearls in her eyes.

She'll snap fingernails in his hair
laugh wildflowers into skin
then burn his tender note,
stir the ash into her coffee.

Testament: III

“Every bed on which she sleepeth, and every vessel on which she sitteth, shall be defiled”

(Leviticus 15:26)

They say I'm faithless
but there are ones I'd worship
all night long –
someone with cotton hands
and bronze eyes,
apricot lips
who'd ask about my day.

But not a macho man who oils his pecs
all night,
who loves his thinning hair
more than me.

Unlearning

I.

I unhook my grey bra. It dangles from my shoulders like a plastic bag in shallow water. My breasts look different now. I guess it's because they're mine again – lease expired and all that. The veins are lazy blue and the nipples soft, without his mouth there's no need to tense. To pretend. To hold air until tongue and wet lips are satisfied.

II.

Gel manicure, *Good as Gold*, lasts up to two weeks, \$59.95. A small woman in a green smock holds my hands in hers. She says my cuticles are healthy then takes a metal instrument, pushes them back and cuts the thin strips of hard skin. I want to ask if she's paid enough but don't want to patronise her with my guilt. I stay quiet. My nails are buffed, sanded, filed, oiled, moisturised then painted. A machine with a purple light 'cures' the polish. I wonder if it will give me skin cancer.

III.

I'm awake and blood is pulsing warm into my pajama pants. I slide my hand under the elastic until I'm cupping myself and hot liquid dribbles through my fingers. For the first time in ten years there's no pain, just me, my blood and so much heat.

IV.

I wipe the aluminium dish rack, use a silver scouring pad and eight squeezes of cream cleanser. When I lift it, there's half a spinach leaf stuck to the granite

and crumbs from the breakfast I couldn't eat. The green looks good against the benchtop, like a cross section of a surrealist *still-life in student's kitchen*. I plait the toast crumbs into my hair. And shove the scourer and cleaner into the dark cupboard where they belong.

V.

I'm standing on one leg in the shower. Blue foam covers my propped-up limb, ankle to mid-thigh. The razor is paused just below my knee. A hairless path tracks my shin bone, it is stark and empty compared to the blonde fuzz on my other leg. Water hits the base of my spine, it is trying to erode me as I stand here, worrying about being pretty. *He liked me smooth, he said it was because the patriarchy had influenced his standards of beauty*. But it's my body now, and I don't think I care. My index finger draws a star in the shaving cream.

Bees

There are bees in your mouth

I push them down
until your lungs gag gold

Until you spit stings into
wide hands that never touched
the right places

I sing and they crawl through your teeth
bring me buttercups
and plant them between my legs

My Poems

I want my poems to hurt you
 cut your cheeks like a Sheffield razor
 make you cry like the day you punched
 her bedroom wall –
 she should have framed it
 shown it to your mother
 taken a photo with your Leica M3
 and fed you the negatives while you slept

I want my poems to say *no*
 girls will be girls
 you were the one lining your stomach with Stella
 she's got a bright future –
 you carry it to full-term
 birth it through closed legs
 in the dole queue

I want my poems to cry
 dig their bones into the earth
 and scream until God notices
 and says *sorry*
 sorry for witch-hunts
 locker rooms
 stones

And for the time she had
 the shit kicked out of her
 for being 'one of those female gays'

Typhoon Season

When it rains we go electric.

It's 12.05 in the afternoon but the sky is purple

fingers of lightning dance between towers

gumball raindrops hit the footpath

grey is turning red and we're the bloody heart

beating through the air. Until we are the air.

And everyone is eating us whole.

Anne Sexton writes a letter to the author of *Kingsman*

You don't get to decide
whether I'm tasty.

You don't go down
on me
then put your hand
through my frontal cortex
and twist my speech bubble to say
that was incredible

because you know what?
That was fucking terrible

didn't they teach you
about three-dimensional characters?
Also you realise it takes more
than one frame and a wide gutter

to make me come?
and now you're making the illustrator
draw me topless,
great listening skills

but then again
you could barely lick me
for all the boasting about how
I'm your ninety-ninth woman

does it mean I get a prize?

Probably not,

I think you're supposed to have

100% satisfaction rate

and honey, you don't even have one star.

Testament: IV

“Let the cursed waters enter into thy belly, and may thy womb swell and thy thigh rot”

(Book of Numbers 5:22)

You may not know me by name
perhaps just my husband –
he was a lot,
a real pain in the arse.

He had an eye for his daughters
and would whip his ‘sword’ out
for any girl around,
and ladies,
he really had no reason to be proud.

Then the fire came
and I was finally let out
my husband’s chum says
do not look behind
but I do
and you know what?

It was better than anything,
than frankincense, myrrh or a first born.

It was wings
and honey and peaches and pearls
and me laughing
in all their faces.

Filling

There's a stranger between my teeth
He fusses and clings
twisting my jawbone

They tell me I must keep Him
otherwise my head will rot
from the inside out
my canines will be letter openers
on a rich man's desk
and they'll mount my skull in a museum
with a tag

Latin name: generic white male discoverer

When they melt me down
they'll see His mercury body
fat and bright
fingers still sunk in my enamel

Last night Emily Dickinson dreamt you inside me

You push an earthquake
into me –
scrub off His face
let me drift out

Press inside
to find the twitch muscle –
the brittle eye
the soul in my throat

Bed sheets scream
as you shape a home
out of
my dizzy flesh

Twelve Thousand Feet

Sky burial is
where you cut up the corpse
an axe for the shoulders
a hunting knife from throat to navel
then split the hips
like wishbones
a strong man either side
end result
a buffet of organs,
vultures and eagles get the choice,
breast or spleen
leg or liver.

It doesn't sound bad
but it's not what I want today.

Wind twists my hair and whispers
that the cliff will crumble.

I want to fall
and never hit the bottom

Anne Sexton teaches me how to pick up boys

No, like this

she rolls her hips
slow like she's trying it out
but dips her lashes
to let you know she'll make you come
in two seconds

Stroke your collarbones

she taps hers and it sounds
like a deerskin drum
lets them know
they can look lower

Pull up your skirt

here's the sweet spot
she holds her red hem
four inches
above her knees
shows me five freckles
and the outline of a moth
where the tattoo artist sketched in pen
but Anne lost her nerve
before the needle

She wraps my hair around
her finger
tugs me close and breathes into

my page

Sweetheart, if this doesn't work

we take them home

in our mouths

Lake Kainui

Your skirt smells like strawberries
and your fingers are milk
slipping down my cheek
above us pohutukawa
pirouette and wink
I want to bite them
see if I can taste red
if it's different from the watercolour
we paint on our hips
you recite villanelles to jawbones
eyelashes and thin ankles
I lie back and you make
a kete with my hair