Kim Hosman: On 1072 ("Title divine--is mine!"")

Though Dickinson uses certain religious words and tropes repeatedly, the meaning she attaches to them may vary from one poem to another. In "That I did always love," Calvary is the emblem for her thoughts on salvation, love, and the risk of tragic loss should a man persist in doubting the constancy of a woman who loves him and is worthy of his trust. In "Title divine," Dickinson again uses the image of Calvary, but she refocuses our associations with the word and shifts the emphasis to issues not of doubt and faith, but of recognition and fate. Consequently, the tone is less personal and more judgmental -- even angry. To understand better Dickinson's role as translator, it is useful to recall some of the conventional meanings of the Christian images that appear in this poem: first, "Title divine." In his sermon "The Mortal Immortalized," Charles Wadsworth describes the terms "the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25), which Christ bestows on himself just before raising Lazarus from the dead, as being Christ's "Divine titles" (234). The power to give life, therefore, is implied in Dickinson's "Title divine." Then there is the figure of Calvary, the place where Christ was crucified along with two thieves. The image is of a hill with three crosses on it, symbolizing both the scene of the sacrifice and the trinity. Finally, the "Crown" and the "Sign" clearly recall the crown of thorns and the mocking sign placed over the cross that read "King of the Jews." "Born -- Bridalled -- Shrouded --," and "Tri Victory" echo Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and trinity respectively. "Is this -- the way?" recalls Christ's words "I am the way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). The images that Dickinson chooses are some of the most poignant and frequently cited in Protestant discourse. They are descriptive of the ultimate sacrifice, the climactic event of the New Testament scriptures. The Son of God submits to humiliation and death, offering redemption even to those who, failing to recognize divinity, mock and torture him. Here are words and figures with weight behind them, with connotations Dickinson finds particularly apt for describing her subject: women and the sacrifices they make -- whether as wives, poets, or Christians. In "Title divine" Dickinson presents the figure of the "Wife" crucified. Women stroke "the Melody" of the word "husband" and consider themselves "Royal." But at Calvary, to be royal is to be humiliated, the symbols of royalty having been transformed into symbols of ridicule by Christ's executioners. Dickinson's ambivalence toward marriage is evident in her letters. One frequently-quoted passage in particular, from a letter addressed to Susan Gilbert, describes feelings similar to those expressed in "Title Divine." Dickinson, then about twenty-two years old, wrote:
How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden whose days are fed with gold. . . but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but -- dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace -- they know that the man of noon, is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. . . . It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up. (Letter 93)

The extreme discrepancy that Dickinson perceived between male and female power is evident in these lines. The male "sun" is ubiquitous. He has freedom to move through the sky and dominion over all living things, including the "scathed" female "blossoms" that have neither mobility nor power. The image of a male lover as a potentially overpowering, indifferent, and life-depleting "sun" and the woman as a frail flower persists for years in Dickinson's letters and poems. In the "Master" letters, the poet refers to herself as "Daisy." In addition, there are poems such as "The Daisy follows soft the Sun" (Poem 106), in which she depicts that extreme dominant-submissive relation. Because Dickinson so often felt that there was little spiritual nourishment available to women as Christians or as wives, and because the tone of several lines in the poems is heavily ironic, it is possible to read the wives in "Title divine" as being fools for stroking the melody, for not realizing they are being mocked.4 At the same time, the resonances of sacred words surround all the human figures in the poem with an aura of virtue and spiritual glory. The melody stroked by the women saying "My Husband" is pitched in that "Key of Calvary" which, for Dickinson, is loud with both beauty and fraud. The image of the bloody sacrifice that results in eternal life for the believer is peculiarly appropriate to the circumstances of the wives of Dickinson's time. The images could suggest the blood that is shed in childbirth. A woman who consented to marriage in the mid-nineteenth century consented to risk, since the mortality rate for women in childbirth was high. A woman taking the risk of "bearing a man's child" gave that man a kind of immortality, an immortality in which she was not believed to share. During Dickinson's time it was generally believed that a woman's body was little more than the soil in which a man's seed was planted (Homans 153-157). And, of course, the child would have the man's name, imparting to him another sort of immortality. So, the wife's "Title divine," her power to be "the Resurrection and the Life," made it her destiny to sacrifice her life (whether literally or figuratively) to gain immortality for her husband, just as Christ's "divine titles" made it his destiny to be sacrificed to save mankind. In works like "That I did always love," and "Title divine" Dickinson attacks the attitudes underlying social power structures and does so by employing the very tropes conventionally used to maintain them. No matter what posture she assumes with respect to authority, however, she is not often able to feel entirely free of the constraints that authority places upon her, and a tinge of despair is also evident in much of her work.5 To explore the reasons for Dickinson's ironic view of victory and for her subsequent despair in "Title divine," we need to turn our attention away from the wives who are "Stroking the Melody" and to look instead at the "Title divine" of the woman-poet about whom the word "wife" is used figuratively. Dickinson tells us that the "Title divine -- is mine." Hers is clearly not a worldly title; it is something intangible, transcendent. But even if the "Title divine" is more glorious, both aesthetically and morally, than any the material world has to offer, it is no great consolation for Dickinson. To wait for the next life is perhaps never to find heaven at all. Dickinson has also told us that "Heaven is so"
far of the Mind" (Poem 370) that no such place can be assumed to exist beyond the mind. The "Title divine" may therefore be a fraud. She has attained a moral and intellectual victory, an internal victory of some kind, but no material sense of fulfillment. However, we do get the feeling that Dickinson values the moral victory, even if true happiness (which we learn from other poems and from her letters is something she craves) is unattainable.

We have still not explored all of what the "Title divine" is for Dickinson. In "Title divine," as in many of Dickinson's most intriguing poems, metaphor is stacked upon metaphor. The tropes of Christ's sacrifice and divinity are also descriptive of Dickinson's sense of identity as a woman and poet. To be a poet, she may be understood to have sacrificed her life in Amherst society and the possibility of being a wife and mother. As the church and the human soul are considered the "brides" of Christ, Dickinson is the bride of poetry. She is "the Word made flesh," a Christ figure whose father in heaven is poetry rather than Deity. Her "Title divine," then, is that of poet. Through poetry she is "the Resurrection and the Life." She has the power to give life to language. In a letter to T. W. Higginson, Dickinson asks "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (Letter 260). She is one, like Christ (but "without the Sign"), whose greatness is not recognized, who would (should she reveal herself) be vulnerable to mockery and ostracism in a society unable and perhaps unwilling to understand her. We can also read the "Title divine" as being a title to love and "The Wife -- without the Sign!" as being a figure for and statement of enduring devotion. The "Title divine" is the true love the poet feels, even though she does not have the "Sign," a ring or marriage license to show as material proof of her commitment. Suzanne Juhasz has elaborated on this point:

> When do you "hold -- Garnet to Garnet -- / Gold to Gold -- "? Because this sounds like a description of wedding rings, of, consequently, a double-ring ceremony, the phrase probably modifies the swoon that God sends to women, so that swoon can be read as symbolic, or symptomatic, of the ordinary woman's response to a man, a husband, to marriage. Thus, being a wife without the sign would be being a wife without the ring -- and without the swoon. No church wedding: no crown. Another sort of marriage. (The Undiscovered Continent 112)

But whether we read Dickinson as poet, lover, or both, she endures the pain of making sacrifices to what or to whom she loves in secret. The missing "Sign" is a double metaphor. It is the mocking, public sign that labels the cross and becomes a metaphor for the position of a wife in society or for the woman-poet. It also suggests a wedding ring -- the public "Sign" for marriage. If we consider these figures to represent Dickinson as a poet, the "Wife -- without the Sign" becomes the woman-poet who has received no public recognition. Since women writers were frequently subject to ridicule, being "without the sign" has its appeal. We see the poet being sacrificed silently in the name of some greater cause that operates beyond the ken of average mortals. But, once again, because she persistently aligns herself with Christ, the pains and humiliations experienced in being the "Empress of Calvary" are nevertheless indicative of power, virtue, and superiority. Dickinson's use of other Christian images in "Title divine" reinforces her several metaphorical premises. The image of "the Crown" carries a particularly heavy load of meaning. The contrast between Christ's mortal crown of thorns and his heavenly crown is often the subject of Protestant hymns. Below are two examples:
See from his head, his hands, his feet,

Sorrow and love flow mingled down:

Did e'er such love and sorrow meet;

Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

The images in this hymn give us an explicit description of what the crown of thorns signified to Puritans. It represented not only sacrifice but love and sorrow too, primary characteristics for both wife and poet in "Title divine." Christ's crown of thorns is at last exchanged for a glorious crown of divinity when he ascends into heaven:

All hail the power of Jesus' name,

Let angels prostrate fall;

Bring forth the royal diadem,

and crown him Lord of all.

Like Christ, both wife and woman-poet must wear a crown of thorns, must bear humiliation and a lack of recognition for their virtues, at least in their mortal lives. But both are possessed of divine power (albeit unacknowledged) and are heirs to the "royal diadem." The symbol of the crown of thorns deifies the act of sacrifice and sanctifies pain and humiliation. Christ, the most loving and perfect human being who ever existed, was forced to wear the crown of thorns by a society that perceived him (as it would perceive a great female poet) as a threat to its power structures. The crown, then, is also a symbol of guilt, a guilt by which the Puritans felt burdened. Superimposing the image of the crown of thorns onto the image of the wife, Dickinson imbues woman's fate (as wife or poet) with great value and dignity. At the same time, she points an accusing finger at a society that crowns her with thorns. The lines "Born -- Bridalled -- Shrouded / In a Day -- / Tri Victory" are bitterly ironic. By inserting the image of a woman being "Bridalled" (as one would bridle a horse) between the facts of birth and death and by calling this "Victory," Dickinson makes a tightly compressed poetic statement. The rebellious tone of these lines is enhanced by her employment of the word bridal as a verb. As Barton St. Armand observes, Dickinson "rightfully 'bridles,' or scornfully rebels, against her fate" (146). Images of rebellion against Satan and against death and of Christ's final victory abound in Protestant sermons, and especially in hymns. For example:

Hail! Mighty Jesus; how divine

Is thy victorious sword!

The stoutest rebel must resign,

At thy commanding word.
There is a double significance in the word "victorious" just as in the image of the crown. Christ's crucifixion is a victory for mankind because it offers a chance for immortality. But for Christ himself, the real victory will come on Judgment Day, when he will lead the forces of good to eradicate evil forever, when he will consign all good souls to heaven and all evil ones to hell. The pain of crucifixion is enough, however, to shake the faith even of the Son of God. The heavenly victory seems remote to him when he cries out to God from the cross, "why hast thou forsaken me?" The wife's ultimate victory in "Title divine" (whether she is interpreted as being woman or woman-poet), like Christ's victory, seems remote because no immediate reward is in sight and because the pain endured in obtaining that victory is so great. The final line of the "Title divine," "Is this -- the way?" asks "is this the way to stroke 'the melody'? Did the tone of my voice express the proper degree of smug contentment when I said 'My Husband'?" Interpreted in this manner, the line sounds sarcastic and supports the idea that the wives with "the Sign" are being mocked by the poet. But it is also possible to interpret the line as echoing Christ's words, "I am the way, the Truth, and the life," in which case we hear the poet asking, "is this the way to salvation? Is the sacrifice of marriage really the way for a woman to find fulfillment in life?" A third possibility exists as well. Underneath the irony and uncertainty, the speaker may be practicing her articulation of the word "Husband" with a certain smugness of her own -- as the secret bride of poetry. All three readings of this line are supported by the text. Dickinson's restatement of religious figures frees them from any single interpretation; their connotations multiply and contradict one another, remaining fluid within poems and between poems.