

Emily Dickinson and the Victorian “Woman Question”

When Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, women were still confined by law and custom to the domestic, “private” sphere, in contrast to the professional, “public” sphere of men. By the time Queen Victoria took the throne of England in 1837, this so-called “woman question”—what is a woman’s proper place in society?—was hotly debated by many politicians, theologians, educators, and writers.

A king in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Princess” (1847) succinctly summarizes the viewpoint of many Victorians: “Man for the field and woman for the hearth: / Man for the sword and for the needle she; / Man with the head and woman with the heart, / Man to command and woman to obey.” Yet women were denied basic liberties even in the domestic sphere. For example, women had no legal rights to their own children until 1839 when Parliament passed the Custody of Infants Act, allowing a divorced mother to obtain custody. It took until 1882 for the Married Women’s Property Act to pass, giving women the right to keep pre-existing land and money in their own names.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the proper education for women in England and America comprised music, languages, art, and needlework. An important milestone came in 1837 when Mount Holyoke College was founded in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and the school’s principal, Mary Lyon, decided to teach her female students traditionally “masculine” subjects such as mathematics, botany, theology, rhetoric, logic, chemistry, and astronomy. This pioneering

opportunity in women’s education enabled Emily Dickinson to receive a uniquely privileged education. This successful “experiment” also led several universities to open their doors to women or create colleges especially for them, although women sometimes could not earn formal degrees.

The “woman question” was especially pointed in literary circles, where women remained subordinate in the mid-nineteenth century. In England, writers Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans used pen names—Currer Bell and George Eliot, respectively—to avoid public censure for the radical ideas and passionate heroines described in their novels, especially *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Greater barriers existed for female poets, since the genre of poetry traditionally belonged to men. A notable exception to Victorian prejudice against women writers was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose life and poetry deeply influenced Dickinson. In Barrett Browning’s radical verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), the poet-heroine refuses to renounce her artistic ambition, when the man she loves expects her to give up her writing to become his helpmeet.

In America, it was even harder for women writers to publish and succeed. The young United States was slower to address women’s rights than England. In an age that looked down upon women “scribblers,” and as the daughter of parents who did not fully understand her intellectual pursuits, Dickinson may have composed such poems as “I dwell in Possibility –” and “They shut me up in Prose”—both written in 1862—to express her own frustration.