

Titanic Operas

A Poets' Corner of Responses to Dickinson's Legacy

THE REAL HIDDEN SCANDAL OF EMILY DICKINSON'S LIFE by Marilyn Hacker

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And I'd like to close with one longish, not too long I hope, poem from *Assumptions*, which started, as so many do, as a kind of gift in a letter from a friend, another poet, named Julia Álvarez, who has a wonderful book called *Homecoming* out from Grove Press. And Julia had been writing a series of sonnets in which there was one on the old Francoise Villon theme of "where are the beauties of yesteryear?" And in the accompanying letter she said, "Of course, I'm sorry that plain old Margaret Fuller died, too." And that was the gift that started this going. It's called "The Ballad of Ladies Lost and Found," and it's dedicated to Julia Álvarez.

Where are the women who, *entre deux guerres*
came out on college-graduation trips,
came to New York on football scholarships,
came to town meeting in a decorous pair?
Where are the expatriate *salonnières*,
the gym teacher, the math-department head?
Do nieces follow where their odd aunts led?
The elephants die off in Cagnes-sur-Mer.
H.D., whose "nature was bisexual,"
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where are the single-combat champions:
the Chevalier d'Eon with curled peruke,
Big Sweet who ran with Zora in the jook,
open-handed Winifred Ellerman,
Colette, who hedged her bets and always won?
Sojourner's sojourned where she need not pack
decades of whitegirl conscience on her back.
The spirit gave up Zora; she lay down
under a weed field miles from Eatonville,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where's Stevie, with her pleated schoolgirl dresses,
and Rosa, with her permit to wear pants?
Who snuffed Clara's *mestiza* flamboyance
and bled Frida onto her canvases?
Where are the Niggerati hostesses,
the kohl-eyed ivory poets with severe

chignons, the rebels who grew out their hair,
 the bulldaggers with marceled processes?
 Conglomerates co-opted Sugar Hill,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Anne Hutchinson, called witch, termagent, whore,
 fell to the long knives, having tricked the noose.
 Carolina María de Jesús'
 tale from the slag heaps of the landless poor
 ended on a straw mat on a dirt floor.
 In action thirteen years after fifteen
 in prison, Eleanor of Aquitaine
 accomplished half of Europe and fourscore
 anniversaries for good or ill,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Has Ida B. persuaded Susan B.
 to pool resources for a joint campaign?
 (Two Harriets act a pageant by Lorraine,
 cheered by the butch drunk on the IRT
 who used to watch me watch her watching me.)
 We've notes by Angelina Grimké Weld
 for choral settings drawn from the *Compiled
 Poems* of Angelina Weld Grimké.
 There's no such tense as Past Conditional,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Who was Sappho's protégée, and when did
 we lose Hrotsvitha, dramaturge and nun?
 What did bibulous Suzanne Valadon
 think about Artemesia, who tended
 to make a life-size murderess look splendid?
 Where's Aphra, fond of dalliance and the pun?
 Where's Jane, who didn't indulge in either one?
 Whoever knows how Ende, Pintrix, ended
 is not teaching Art History at Yale,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Is Beruliah upstairs behind the curtain
 debating Juana Inés de la Cruz?
 Where's savante Anabella, Augusta-Goose,
 Fanny, Maude, Lidian, Freda, and Caitlin,
 "without whom this could never have been written"?
 Louisa who wrote, scrimped, saved, sewed, and nursed,
 Malinche, who's, like all translators, cursed,
 Bessie, whose voice was hemp and steel and satin,
 outside a segregated hospital,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where's Amy, who kept Ada in cigars
 and love, requited, both country and courtly,
 although quinquagenarian and portly?
 Where's Emily? It's very still upstairs.
 Where's Billie, whose strange fruit ripened in bars?
 Where's the street-scavenging Little Sparrow?
 Too poor, too mean, too weird, too wide, too narrow:
 Marie Curie, examining her scars,
 was not particularly beautiful;
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Who was the grandmother of Frankenstein?
 The Vindicatrix of the Rights of Woman.
 Madame de Sévigné said prayers to summon
 the postman just as eloquent as mine,
 though my Madame de Grignan's only nine.
 But Mary Wollstonecraft had never known
 that daughter, nor did Paula Modersohn.
 The three-day infants blinked in the sunshine.
 The mothers turned their faces to the wall;
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Tomorrow night the harvest moon will wane
 that's floodlighting the silhouetted wood.
 Make your own footnotes; it will do you good.
 Emeritae have nothing to explain.
 She wasn't very old, or really plain--
 my age exactly, volumes incomplete.
 "The life, the life, will it never be so sweet?"
 She wrote it once; I quote it once again
 midlife at midnight when the moon is full
 and I can almost hear the warning bell
 offshore, sounding through starlight like a stain
 on waves that heaved over what she began
 and truncated a woman's chronicle,
 and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

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