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Tell all the Truth but tell it Slant: An Analysis of Two Neo-historical Biographical TV Adaptations through

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Universiteit Leiden

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES
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TELL ALL THE TRUTH BUT TELL IT SLANT-

An Analysis of Two Neo-historical Biographical TV Adaptations
through a Feminist Lens.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a rise in tv-shows, movies and books which present an innovative approach to fictionalising history. The following thesis was inspired by what Eleanor Stanford, in her article for the New York Times “This is Not History’s Catherine the Great”, calls a “recent spate of winking, mischievous period productions”.¹ This new typology of works approaches period-drama through a more self-aware and contemporary lens, as a notable historical figure and their appropriation becomes a point of entry for the directors and creators to explore more modern themes. It is also interesting to note, as Russo states, that “the anachronistic turn in historical drama [...] has largely been associated with telling women’s stories, suggesting an interest in explicitly drawing links between historical and contemporary gendered roles and expectations” (539). An aspect that unites these works is thus the presentation of a new perspective, through a female-centric narrative.

With the rise of such period-dramas on the silver screen, one must interrogate themselves on what function and form these works take on. As Belinda Bromilow, in the role of aunt Elizabeth, says “that’s where the being lives, in the how and why, not the should” (*The Great*, 2x10, 42:48-42:54).² In order to explore both of these aspects, in this thesis, I will present a case study analysis of two such tv-shows: *Dickinson* (2019), created by Alena Smith, and *The Great* (2020), created by Tony McNamara. *Dickinson* adapts the life of famed American poet Emily Dickinson as she navigates becoming a female poet in a deeply misogynistic society.³ *The Great*, on the other hand, adapts the life of Empress Catherine the Great, as she rises to power by staging a coup against her husband and becomes one of the most

¹ The title of the thesis “Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant-” is a citation of a poem by Emily Dickinson, “Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant - (1263).” *PoetryFoundation.org*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263. Accessed 20 January 2023.

² All citations from the shows derive from personal transcriptions of the dialogue.

³ As questions of authorship are quite complex when speaking of tv-series, where “the final product of an aired episode goes through complex collaborative processes, filtering the contributions of performers, designers, editors, and network executives” (Mittel 91), and this thesis does not investigate such matters, I will refer exclusively to the creators of both shows.

renowned rulers of Russia. These two tv-series have more than once been mentioned in tandem in newspaper articles, as the creators have given interviews together and both works present distinct similarities. However, they have not been studied in tandem, or singularly, in an academic setting, with the exception of Russo's article "'You Are, like, so Woke': *Dickinson* and the Anachronistic Turn in Historical Drama", which focuses on the formal characteristics of the show, and briefly underlines its feminist intent.

For the purpose of this thesis these two specific works were chosen for a parallel analysis as they both present a female lead through which, as we will see, aspects of modern feminist consciousness are explored. In addition, the creators of both shows have spoken about the desire to break away from the traditional period-drama genre. Tony McNamara, for example, "sees the genre as 'overdue' for some reassessment" (Stanford), while Smith sees "period as a way to write a stylized presence" (qtd. Stanford). This has brought them to explore new and different ways of approaching historical tv adaptations. This thesis will thus address questions such as: where can we position these shows in terms of medium, genre and broader artistic approach? What formal characteristics do they present? How are women portrayed? How do these works explore feminist matters such as agency, autonomy, gendered socialization and power? In what ways do they present the different modes through which women's subjugation is maintained? How do the women portrayed in these shows reclaim their agency in the confines of their gender and status? This will be done through the method of close reading through a Feminist lens.

Therefore, the following thesis will be divided in three chapters. Starting with the first chapter, I will first focus on the formal features these two case studies display, paying attention to their genre, medium and broader artistic tradition. The following chapters then will present an analysis of how *Dickinson* and *The Great* explore feminist matters. To do so a number of secondary sources were used, in which prominent feminist theorist present and explore

concepts such as free agency, objectification, traditional socialization, normative competence and power.

Chapter Two, 'Agency Denied', will focus on how women are represented, the roles they hold and how objectification, marriage and the categorization as mentally ill are used as tools of oppression. Chapter Three, 'Agency Reclaimed', will then focus on how women deal with their agency being restricted and their attempts and success at reclaiming it. Applying feminist concepts and theories while using the method of close reading allows for a better understanding of how these shows reflect on contemporary feminist issues such as agency, autonomy and the modes of oppression women are subjected to. Through an analysis of the manners in which agency is reclaimed, central to both shows, one can explore the different ways *The Great* and *Dickinson* reflect on the present through the prism of the past.

Chapter 1: The Case Study

As mentioned in the introduction, recent years have seen the “rise of the anachronistic female lead” (Horton) in a number of television biographies. In this chapter I will delve deeper into the choice of the corpus and how *Dickinson* and *The Great* can be understood as case studies of neo-historical and postmodernist biographical adaptations, through an analysis of the show’s formal characteristics. However, first I would like to give some information on the content and contexts of these two tv-series.

The Great premiered May 15th 2020 on Hulu and to date has aired three seasons, each composed of ten hour-long episodes.⁴ Tony McNamara, the screenwriter and creator of the show, inspired by his homonymous 2008 play, brings to the silver screen a riveting and fresh adaptation of the life of Catherine the Great, played by Elle Fanning. The first season follows Catherine (Elle Fanning) as she orchestrates a *coup* against her husband Peter III of Russia (Nicholas Hoult), alongside a cast of unlikely allies: her maid, later turned lady anew, Marial (Phoebe Fox); Peter’s advisor, count Orlov or ‘Orlo’ (Sacha Dhawan); Peter’s aunt, Elizabeth and Peter’s General, Velementov (Douglas Hodge). In the later seasons the series follows Catherine as she rules over the country and deals with maintaining her power and bringing a new era to Russia.

Dickinson, on the other hand, premiered on November 1st 2019 on Apple TV+ and concluded on December 24th 2021, with three seasons composed of ten thirty-minute episodes each. Alena Smith, creator and executive producer of the show, adapts both Emily Dickinson’s life and poetry in a genre-bending literary biopic for the silver screen. The show follows Emily, portrayed by Hailee Steinfeld, as she navigates life and her love for writing in an extremely constraining society. Moving away from the court intrigue we find in *The Great*, *Dickinson*

⁴ The last season, which premiered May 12th 2023, has not been included in this thesis.

explores the domestic dimension as Emily interacts occasionally with other prominent literary figures, but mostly with friends and family, composed of her father, Edward (Toby Huss), her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson (Jane Krakowski), her sister, Lavinia or Vinnie (Anna Baryshnikov), her brother, Austin (Adrian Blake Enscoe), and finally her sister-in-law/lover and best friend Sue Gilbert (Ella Hunt).

As we can deduce from the brief summary of the events represented in *The Great* and *Dickinson*, both shows can be categorised as biopics, a term which refers to biographies made for the screen (Indrusiak and Ramgrab 97). In addition, *Dickinson* can be inserted in the subcategory of literary biopics, which adapt the lives of writers. Due to the sources used by creators to “compose a mosaic portrait of the character and his/her times” biopics can be considered as “an adaptation of one or more previous texts” (Indrusiak and Ramgrab 98), be that previous biographies or different types of documents. Adaptation, as defined by Sanders, is “a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of revision in itself” (22). Such works can be created with the purpose of giving voice to people/characters that were previously marginalised and give new relevance to the original source text (Sanders 23), which *The Great* and *Dickinson* attempt and succeed in doing.

In both cases this act of revision showcases a clear feminist intention. As such, both series, with their female leads and feminist themes, can be inserted in the broader Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking tradition, even if these terms are often reserved for literary texts. As Ostriker explains, “since the core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them” (73-74). *Dickinson*, for example, “asks us not to congratulate ourselves that we have moved ‘beyond’ the circumstances faced by Emily, but instead to see the historical continuities between the struggle to claim a poetic voice by both historical and contemporary

women writers” (Russo 544). The creators of both shows have expressed that what attracted them most to adapt these stories is the possibilities of exploring contemporary issues through a transhistorical lens, since, as McNamara states “their problems are the same ours are” (Blacker 12:50) and “because our own time is quite confusing, I think it’s useful to look back” (Stanford) Ostriker identifies four common elements in feminist revisionist productions: these works “are enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism”, they “involve reevaluations of social, political, and philosophical values”, they present “no nostalgia, no faith that the past is a repository of truth, goodness, or desirable social organization” and finally they correlate “with formal experiment” (87). As we shall see all these elements are present in *The Great* and *Dickinson*. The feminist undertones of both works will be explored further in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis.

As already hinted, the creators’ innovative approach to the biopic genre is partially due to how they present past and present as united, rather than divided, straying away from concepts of fidelity and accuracy, and infusing their works with postmodern, but mainly neo-historical aesthetics. It is important to note that the reason *The Great* and *Dickinson* should be considered more neo-historical rather than postmodernist is the lack of experimentation with focalisation or narrative, as both tv-series are told in rather linear fashion, focalising primarily through their main characters and avoiding flashbacks and flashforwards. McNamara recounts the process of creating and adapting, saying ““We would make bits up. [...] Then we’d go, what really happened? And we’d go back and research a bit”. [...] Writers would put interesting tidbits onto a whiteboard and the cherry-pick details that felt “tonally interesting”” (Stanford). Smith, on the other hand, researched Dickinson’s life in detail, but wanted to present a “metaphorical representation of [Emily’s] life and body of work and what she means to us today” (Blacker 7:58-8:07). Both are thus more interested in exploring the thematic resonance the lives of these women have to the present, rather than accurately describing the past. This is done in part by

inserting characters and encounters that, as far as we know, are not present in the historical record. Catherine's allies, for example, are mostly fictitious, apart from Orlo and Elizabeth. The latter, however, never supported the coup against Peter and actually ruled over Russia as regent and died before Catherine's rise to power.

Following a new understanding of history brought on by postmodernism – according to which “history is flawed because it must be accessed through narrative, and that narrative inevitably entails the occlusion and exclusion of certain stories and contexts” (Harris 193-194), rendering the past functionally unknowable historical fiction moves towards a neo-historical aesthetic. As Russo argues, historical fiction “is inevitably presentist”(535); however, the manner with which the text interacts with this aspect is what allows us to categorise these works further. Harris states that:

The neo-historical aesthetic acknowledges the inevitable failure of narratives about the past but - in contrast to its postmodern predecessor, historiographic metafiction - simultaneously and contradictorily works to create coherent stories about it that recognise their own limitations even as they attempt to overcome them. (194)

As such it “uses [...] deconstruction to create new narratives and openly fictionalized neo-histories” (Harris 194) in which both the past and the present are both analysed through each other's prisms. In a sense then both McNamara and Smith adapt and fictionalise the lives of Catherine the Great and Emily Dickinson to comment and analyse the time they lived in through a contemporary gaze. This is in part also done through the interaction between the main characters and a number of other historical figures, which elevates the feeling of scandal. In *The Great*, for example, Catherine meets Voltaire, who helps her make peace with sacrificing love for the greater good as they debate over philosophical ideas and exchange crude jokes. In *Dickinson*, on the other hand, Emily interacts with numerous famous writers, such as Thoreau, Alcott, Whitman, Allan Poe and even Sylvia Plath, often debating art and poetry. Through these encounters the viewer is able to gain a deeper understanding of Emily's approach to her own poetry.

The choice to make use of canonical, 'important' historical figures has permitted a point of entry, a sense of authority, to recount these narratives. For who would want to hear the story of a poor girl who had to marry for money because her family was in disgrace, if it was not the great and revolutionary Catherine, empress of Russia? And who would want to sit and watch a story about a girl who wanted nothing but to write poetry and love who she wished, if it was not the great and enigmatic Emily Dickinson? As McNamara states "the good thing about period is that there are high stakes to it, which is great for storytelling and great for exploring ideas and people" (Stanford). The fictionalisation of real-life people becomes a source of curiosity and scandal as "here is an ontological scandal when a real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation" (Mchale 85). However, by adapting their lives, these works bring these important historical and literary figures "down from the ivory tower by showing their human and flawed nature" (Indrusiak and Ramgrab 98), which allows for a deeper exploration of the characters' emotions, ideas and motivations.

This new approach to history and the historical genre in both postmodernist and neo-historical works becomes clear as we analyse certain formal characteristics employed in these productions, such as a distinct approach to fictionalisation, a blurring-of-lines on multiple planes and an abundant use of anachronism. We have already seen that McNamara and Smith, during the creation of their shows, took liberties fictionalising the lives of their characters in order to create a new story. *The Great* declares in its paratext that it is a fictionalised production of Catherine's life with the inclusion, under the title, of a parody of a disclaimer, which reads "*An Occasionally True Story" or later "*An Almost Entirely Untrue Story" (see fig.1 and 2). *Dickinson*, on the other hand, does not present a disclaimer, but rather opens each season with a short factual biographical overview, narrated by Sue through voice-over and accompanied by pictures and other archival materials. However, the fictionalised nature of the show becomes

immediately clear with the employment of deliberately anachronistic language in the scene immediately following the overview.



Figure 2: Screen Capture. Title Page. 1x10. 05:34. *The Great* (2020)



Figure 1: Screen Capture. Title Page. 2x10. 03:53. *The Great* (2020)

As Indrusiak and Ramgrab state, “blurring boundaries seems to be one of the characteristic traits of postmodern art” (100). *Dickinson* and *The Great* present a blurring between fact, history and fiction, between past and present, between different genres and different linguistic registers. For example, both shows are categorised on their respective streaming services as comedy/dramas, which already suggests that they employ and blur the borders between these two narrative genres, which present features sometimes at odds with each other. This genre hybridization is not merely relegated to the blend between drama and comedy, but also takes form through the careful employment of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, which also exemplify the relation between history and fiction these works

present. In *The Great*, for example, McNamara often plays with one of the most well-known myths surrounding the empress of Russia, her supposed sexual encounter with a horse, even inserting drawings of such an encounter in the series (see fig. 3).

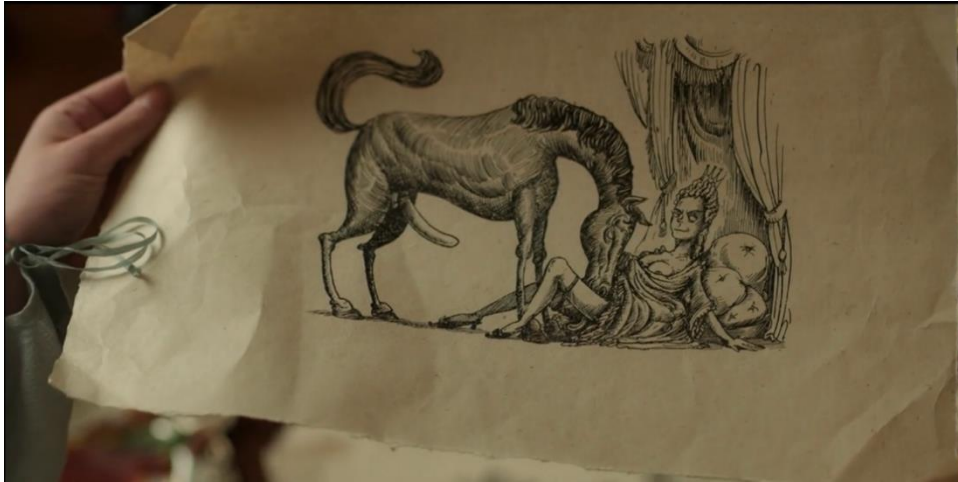


Figure 3: Screen Capture. Lude Drawing. 1x07. 33:03. *The Great* (2020)

In *Dickinson*, the intertextual references are even more stark, as almost every character is based on a real-life person, the sets are faithfully accurate in replicating Emily's Amherst home and there are numerous intertextual references to Emily's private letters and poems. Every episode engages with a different poem, which is included in the title (Ex. episode 1x01 is titled "Because I could not stop for Death") and is used as a thematic template for the narration. As Emily writes and thinks about her work the words appear on screen, while a voice-over of Emily reads them (see fig. 4). The handwritten words quickly disappear from the screen underlining the intangible nature of Dickinson's poetry, a production that transcends the simple act of putting pen to paper. As "literary biopics depict writers both as creations and creators, while the artists' works are rendered both as fact and fiction" (Indrusiak and Ramgrab 99) *Dickinson* creates links between more or less fictitious events in Emily's life and the composition of her poems, without explaining or oversimplifying her artistic process, but rather

offering “a way of reading Dickinson’s oeuvre that draws attention to the myriad of influences that she drew from the world around her” (Russo 550).



Figure 4: Screen Capture. Emily Writing. 1x05. 26:22. *Dickinson* (2019)

The blurring of boundaries between genres, fiction and history, present and past is also exemplified by the abundant use of anachronism in both series. As Russo states “the distance between past and present is arguably the appeal of the historical drama: the viewer is invited to revel in the details through which it is signalled that the past is not the present, such as clothing, settings and modes of behaviour”(537). In *Dickinson* and *The Great*, while the settings and costumes underline the distance between the past and presence, the creators employ an abundant use of intentional anachronism, especially in the linguistic register, linking these two realms anew. In *Dickinson* the young siblings speak like Gen-zers, as Lavinia for example says “you’re like, so woke”(1x07, 13:49-13:50). Their mannerisms are also very reminiscent of teenagers today, as in the third episode of the first season, where everyone attends a party to the beat of EDM music, twerks and poses as if they were taking pictures at the prom. *The Great* employs similar strategies as the characters often make use of anachronistic vulgar language. Characters are also found to sometimes have contemporary mannerisms, the best example of which is the man who is eating popcorn while attending Catherine’s public labour in episode 2x09. The outros of each episode also feature a

contemporary song that reflects the main themes presented in each episode. The employment of anachronisms can also be seen in the “self-conscious articulation of ideologies associated with the modern world” (Russo 546), exemplified by the casual acceptance, in both series, of homosexual relationships. The viewer, who might expect a harsher condemnation of same-sex relationships as these works are set in the past, is brought to apply a more contemporary perception of sexuality to the fictionalised past.

It is also important to note that the choice to recount these stories through the specific medium of the television series is also very significant. I would argue that both shows fall into what Hilmes refers to as “serialized episodic” (27). Unlike shows of an episodic nature, in which each episode presents a separate closed narrative (such as *Law and Order*), or serials, in which a longer story that carries over from episode to episode is presented (such as *Dallas*), shows presenting a serialised episodic style have a more hybrid nature. In *The Great* and *Dickinson*, the narrative is explored on different levels as they present individual episodic narrative arcs through which the broader seasonal arc is interweaved. As Newman states “serials tend to focus on ensembles, with each episode interweaving several strands of narrative in alternation scene by scene” (Newman 16). This is the central feature the serialised episodic form takes on, with the addition of each episode also having a central theme or issue that is resolved by the end of the episode, but remains important for the broader narrative arc.

This form, unlike film, is able to create “dense, complex story worlds that can unfold over months, years, and even decades” and as such tv-series “can tie viewers to characters, situations, and settings much more effectively exactly because they eschew visual pyrotechnics [of film] in favor of good writing, straightforward exposition, and the evolution of characters and plots over time” (Hilmes et al. 27). The serial form thus allows the creators to explore the character’s inner workings more deeply over a longer period of time. As McNamara recounts in an interview about *The Great*’s development “in the film version I could never tell the story

properly [...] as soon as I knew I had [...] thirty hours it became [...] exciting” (Blacker 16:09-16:19). These series, as historical serials, have the added bonus of being able, in their long form narrative, to “balance and address the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ within one complex narrative trajectory” (Creeber 13-14), as the tension between the characters, while on the surface seems due to personal conflict, infers which broader social and political issues are explored.

I have stated that the serial episodic form allows for a deeper exploration of characters' inner workings. One might interrogate themselves on how exactly this is possible. Mittel explains that “since interiority is a restricted area of access, we must infer characters' morality and beliefs on the basis of exterior markers, including their appearance, behaviors, and interactions, as well as how other characters act toward and talk about them” (134). In both shows, for example, scenes where women are experiencing pleasure often feature close ups on rosy cheeks and bright colours, accompanied by pleasant soft nice music. However, scenes where women are performing their so-called wifely duties, without experiencing pleasure, feature close-ups of bored or annoyed facial expressions, without accompanying music, whilst the sexual act assumes a more vulgar nature. It is thus clear that both series explore their characters' interiority outside of dialogue mainly through the use of musical accompaniment and extreme close-ups to display emotion. We can see the latter clearly in fig. 5, in which Catherine has just given the order to commence the *coup* and consequently has doomed her lover to die.



Figure 5: Screen Capture. Catherine as a Tear Falls Down. 1x10. 48:36. *The Great* (2020)

In conclusion, the peculiar approach to the relationship between history, fiction, past and present, is what renders these works so innovative and interesting. In fact, both creators engage in formal experimentation, through the use of creative anachronism, intertextuality and interdiscursivity, thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction, past and present, and even genres. The choice to narrate these stories in the serial episodic form, which supports a more in-depth plot and character development, in addition to the shows neo-historical approach, allows the creators to present and explore numerous feminist themes, such as women's agency and autonomy. These themes will be examined in the following chapters, starting from an analysis of the different ways agency is denied to the women in these shows and concluding with an analysis of the different ways agency is reclaimed.

Chapter 2: Agency Denied

As previously stated, at the core of revisionist works is a desire to give a voice to those who have previously been silenced due to their gender, status, race, religion, or any other aspect of their identity that has made them marginalised in the society they lived in. Hence the purpose of these works is to explore and redefine the past and the present to provide a better understanding of who one is and how one has been perceived by others and oneself, now and in the past. This thesis will thus analyse the representation of women in *The Great* and *Dickinson* through feminist notions of agency, power and autonomy. Therefore, in this chapter, I will focus on how women are portrayed in *The Great* and *Dickinson*, the process of objectification the main characters go through and other methods used to enforce women's subjection.

Firstly, we must define what is meant with the term 'woman'. The term can be understood in relation to sex, thus meaning that 'woman' refers to human females that are regarded as such depending on their biological and anatomical features (Mikkola). However, 'woman' can also be a term understood in relation to gender. 'Gender', a quite complex term to define, in this particular instance refers to the social construct surrounding being a woman or a man. Millet defines gender as "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (31). While the differentiation between sex and gender has long been the subject of lively debate between different feminist theorists, in this thesis the analysis of the portrayal of female characters will be made with the understanding that their categorization as women is due to both their sex and their gender, as understood in the time periods the series are set in.

2.1 On the Role of Women

Before delving into the analysis, we must define the terms ‘agency’ and ‘autonomy’, central themes in both *The Great* and *Dickinson*. Schlosser states that “in very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and ‘agency’ denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity”. To be a free agent one must be autonomous and “being autonomous is acting on motives, reasons, or values that are one’s own” (Stoljar). To be free can thus be understood as the ability to act autonomously while being an agent in one’s own life. In the two cases analysed in this thesis, the creators present an historicized view of women, highlighting their, at least initial, lack of autonomy and freedom of agency. This is mainly done through the words of men commenting on the role of women in their society.

In *The Great*, for example, it is underlined multiple times that Catherine, as a woman, is merely a means to an end, an incubator for the future heir of Russia. She is not a person, but rather a toy for Peter to flaunt and satisfy his desires with. As such, if she cannot produce an heir she will be disposed of and replaced with another woman-object that can. In the first episode of the first season Catherine arrives at the Russian court full of hope and love for the man she will soon marry. When she meets him for the first time Catherine states “Emperor Peter, I present this branch of spruce. It is an evergreen, and I hope it will be a symbol of our feelings for each other, that we will be constant and caring all our lives” (1x01, 03:04-03-15). He, on the other hand, jokes that they should send Catherine back as she is smaller than in the painting he had seen, and upon receiving the “twig” asks his advisors if she is an inbred. Catherine soon discovers that the letter she had received from Peter, the letter that made her fall in love with him, was sent by his advisors. Throughout this episode, the spectator sees Catherine’s hope and naivete fade away as the harsh reality of her situation, her marriage, sinks in.

Catherine is also constantly reminded of her position as a woman in the Russian court and her marriage. During the first meeting between Peter and Catherine, she is showcased as a prized possession, and observed by Peter and his advisors. In fig. 6 we see Peter as he speaks directly to his advisors about Catherine as if she is not present while she is standing just behind him. Later the Archbishop (Adam Godley) states that “I now need to find out if you're intact” (1x01, 05:07-05:09), again showcasing to the spectator that a woman is an object and that her worth is directly tied to her purity. Later on, when Catherine tries to give a toast after her wedding, Peter reminds her “No, you don't talk, my love” (1x01, 08:04-08:06), underlining that she is to be seen, but not heard. After a confrontation following the burning of the school Catherine had asked Peter to found, the emperor makes clear what is expected from his new wife:

[Peter] Don't look at me like that. You're a disappointment to me, too. I do not need a wife with a poisonous mouth and a dry cunny. I will shut you up at my pleasure.

[Catherine] You will try and fail.

[Peter] You will be happy. You will die here in content old age, having given me many hours of pleasure and service, and many heirs. Boys, preferably. I do have a temper and some rage. You cannot cross me (1x01, 40:47-41:17)

It thus becomes evident that Catherine is a means to an end. Peter needed a wife and heir and she was perfect, beautiful, young and from the right family.

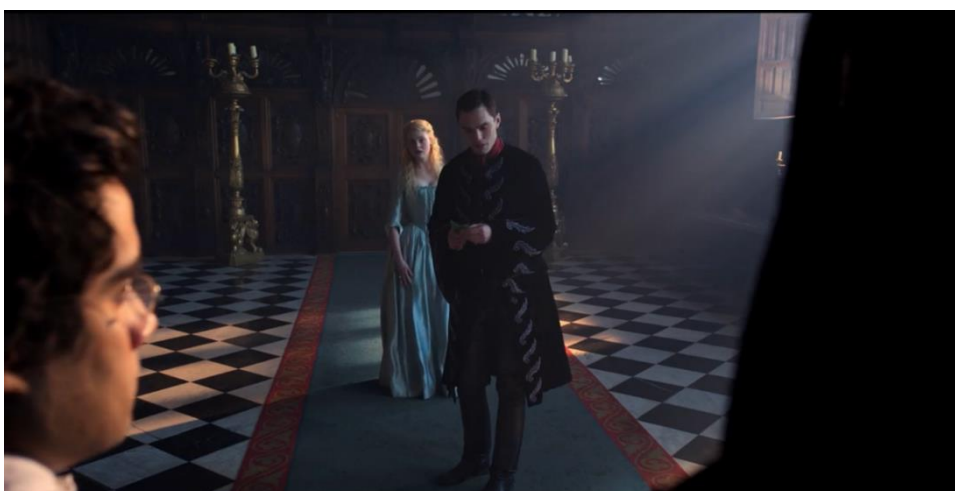


Figure 6: Screen Capture. Peter Speaks with his Advisor as Catherine Stands Back. 1x01. 03:22. *The Great* (2020)

In *Dickinson*, while we move away from royal courts, a similar sentiment transpires. The place of a woman is in the home: her role is to be a good housewife and to serve the man of the house. Unlike Catherine, Emily is shown from the beginning as having a deep disdain for the role and expectations imposed on her by society. She is not shown as a naive girl that only longs for marriage and love, but rather a wild thing. In the first episode of the first season, for example, Emily's mother tells her father: "she is wild, she does not know how to behave as a proper young lady and she will be the ruin of this family" (1x01, 10:23-10:29). In fact, when a suitor arrives Emily's mother is appalled to have her daughter slouched on the couch in a very unladylike manner (see fig. 7). Throughout the season her mother, more than once, laments the fact that her daughter does not wish to marry, that she is not learning her proper place in society.



Figure 7: Screen Capture. Emily Speaking with her Mother. 1x01. 05:04. *Dickinson*

On the other hand, Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, indulges his daughter's desire not to marry and become a housewife, stating "Emily doesn't have to marry anyone as far as I'm concerned" (1x01, 09:18-09:20). The fact that he does not expect her to marry, however, does not mean that he has progressive views regarding the positions of women in society. Edward truly believes that a woman should serve the man of the house, if not a husband, a

brother or some other male relative. For example, while discussing matters of inheritance

Edward explains:

[Emily] Are you really telling me... That you're giving everything to Austin? Just like that? After all that's happened? Every single thing?

[Edward] But of course. Who else would it go to? You women? [...] Imagine how that would look, if I left everything to my daughter. The bank would likely tear the will right up. They would think I was insane. Women can't own property. No, Em, it has something to do with how emotional they are. They simply can't be trusted to make their own decisions. That's why they need to be left in a man's care, if not my own, then Austin's. And if not his, then his son's. The men of this family shall remain in charge, hopefully, for many generations to come. I mean, you women are blessed not to have the burden of independence on your shoulders. Oh. Not to worry though, my dear. You will be well taken care of (3x08, 14:14-15:28)

It is thus clear that while Emily, unlike Catherine, is not a woman-object meant solely to reproduce, she is still a lesser human being compared to men. She is expected to fulfil other duties in the home, such as chores, and she is meant to be subservient to all her male relatives' desires and expectations.

Both Catherine and Emily are deeply aware of their situation as women, and throughout both series work towards gaining their freedom whilst fulfilling their destinies. After an unsuccessful attempt at escape, as she holds a knife to her own throat, Catherine states:

[Catherine] Ever since I was a child, I felt like greatness was in store for me. A great life, I felt. Like God himself had spat me forth to land on this Earth and in some way transform it. That I was here for a reason, a purpose.

[Marial] Why did He make you a woman, then?

[Catherine] For comedy, I guess (1x01, 47:30-47:49)

It is right after this that Marial infers that many in the country are unhappy and explains to Catherine the laws of succession in Russia: in case of the death of the emperor, without the presence of an heir, Russia would be ruled by its empress. Disappointed with her new husband, disenchanted with her situation, Catherine starts to contemplate how she can regain her agency. Throughout the first season of *The Great* Catherine stages a coup against Peter to take control of Russia, as she believes she would be a better leader than her violent, misogynistic and careless husband. For Catherine, transforming the world becomes, as we will see, her way to

reclaim agency and autonomy over herself and ensure that other marginalised people might enjoy more freedom.

In *Dickinson*, when Emily's mother announces the arrival of a potential suitor and warns her daughter to behave, to not act like a cat as she had done before, Emily laments "tragically I am a woman" (1x01, 04:16-04:17). The suitor, George (Samuel Farnsworth), a good friend of Emily, later asks her why she will not accept his proposal. Emily states "I have one purpose on this earth and that is to become a great writer. A husband would put a stop to that" (1x01, 06:02-06:10). Like Catherine, Emily believes she has a higher purpose in life, a purpose that transcends her supposed 'female nature' and the expectations imposed on her by society. For Emily, her agency, her autonomy, is manifested through her writing. Her poems are her outlet, the way she expresses herself to the world, the medium through which she establishes and maintains her independence in a time where she had little freedom outside of the confines of her room. Her work as a writer, while being a tangible thing, also becomes a symbol for the freedom of her mind.

2.2 *On Objectification*

In the previous section I have referred to the main characters of these two shows as being treated as woman-objects. But what does this truly mean? Objectification, which can be defined in broad terms as the treatment or view of women as an object (Papadaki), "is not only a slippery, but also a multiple, concept" (Nussbaum, 251). In her article "Objectification" Nussbaum identifies seven different components involved in the process of objectifying someone: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity (257). Langton adds to these seven components three others: reduction to body, reduction to appearance and silencing (228-229).

In *The Great*, all of these components are present in the relationship between Catherine and Peter. The first meeting between Catherine and Peter exemplifies not only Peter's sense of ownership over his new wife, but also two other components in the process of objectification: instrumentality and reduction to appearance. Instrumentality can be understood as the act of "the objectifier [treating] the object as a tool for his or her purposes" (Nussbaum 257). During their first meeting Peter says "you're perfect. I need an empress who's from aristocracy, but not from a family that is powerful or a player. Your family, apparently, are fucked" (1x01, 03:54-04:01), underlying the fact that Catherine is a mere means to an end. In this single utterance one can also identify two other components of objectification – denial of autonomy and inertness – as what Peter fears is not any action Catherine might take against him directly, but what her family might do.

In addition to these elements Peter also reduces Catherine to her appearance. Langton explains this to be the treatment of a person "primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses" (229). When he sees her for the first time Peter exclaims: "You look taller in your portrait. Send her back. Get me a tall one" (1x01, 02:39-02:44). Even though he is joking, it is clear from this exclamation that Peter cares a great deal about the appearance of his future wife, so much so that his treatment of her is based on how beautiful she is and how useful to him she will be. Peter's careless comment also reminds the viewer that Catherine is an object that is "interchangeable" in case she becomes lacking in her duties.⁵ In addition to the reduction to appearance, Catherine is also often, as we have already hinted at, reduced to her body, or more accurately to her body parts. At a party with the other women at court, during which a confrontation arises, one of the women tells Catherine "you are nothing but a tolerated womb" (1x04, 31:35-31:37), reinforcing the idea that Catherine is merely a tool to ensure the

⁵ "Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types" (Nussbaum 257).

royal line. Peter shares this sentiment as well later in the season. When he learns about the coup and confronts Catherine he exclaims “any cunt can give me a baby” (1x10, 37:46-36:48), but is later dissuaded from killing her only because she plays into his need to feel important.

It is clear, throughout the series, that Catherine’s objectification is not only done by Peter, but also by other members of the court. When Catherine is speaking to General Velementov about political and military strategies they could implement in Russia’s war with Sweden, he does not listen to a word she says but remarks “the way your mouth moves, silky and pert. Say more” (1x08, 18:28-18:34). He goes on interrupting her speech by remarking on her eyes and hair, until Catherine has enough and punches him, stating “I am not a pretty jasmine flower, with swimming pools for eyes, you fat fuck [...] I am terrifying” (1x08 19:47-20:00). It is exactly at this point that Catherine, who until now has been working in the shadows with her few supporters, starts to assert herself, combating the objectification imposed on her.

In *Dickinson*, on the other hand, only some of the components are present. Edward feels a sense of ownership over his daughters, as we can see from his speech regarding inheritance, in which he also underlines his view of women as “lacking in autonomy and self-determination” (Nussbaum 257). His beliefs surrounding women publishing, or pursuing any career outside of the home or the bounds of women’s matters, also show various aspects of objectification. When Emily announces that her poem has been published, Edward becomes infuriated and states “wicked girl [...] we have given you too much freedom and now you have taken advantage of our kindness [...] [and] exhibit such scandalous behavior” (1x01, 23:51-24:03). He thus tries to silence her and treats her as “lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity” (Nussbaum 257). She is not allowed to pursue a career and publish her work simply because he does not “approve of a woman seeking to build herself a literary reputation” (1x01, 22:37-23:41).

While the processes of objectification of both Catherine and Emily have been presented up until this point as something imposed on them, it is important to note that both characters do not accept this quietly. When Catherine is thinking of a way to gather support from General Velementov, Marial states: “[Marial] Put that diamond in your cunt and spread your legs. That will dazzle him properly.” Catherine replies: “Marial, I will not fuck my way to support” (1x08, 15:34-15:41). And while Catherine could use her objectification by others in her favour, in this case she refuses, not wanting to achieve power through her body, but rather through the quality of her ideas and beliefs. However, Catherine does understand that as a woman she sometimes must make use of the perceptions others have of her. For example, after Peter has been poisoned and it seems that Catherine will become empress, Marial asks:

[Marial] What will you wear?

[Catherine] What? Who cares about that?

[Marial] You're presenting yourself as the Empress of Russia. You must look good.

[Catherine] It only matters what I say.

[Marial] Honestly, as a woman, it's far more important what you wear.

[Catherine] Marial, that is-

[Marial] Incredibly true. (1x05, 23:24-23:39)

While in this instance she merely follows Marial’s lead, later in the show Catherine starts to understand that her appearance can be used as a tool in her favour. This is especially true during her coronation when she opts to wear a traditional, albeit out of fashion, Russian gown to embody the spirit of a Russian royal (see fig. 8).



Figure 8: Screen Capture. Catherine's Coronation. 2x02. 39:17. *The Great* (2020)

Catherine also uses the perception others have of her as naive and innocent in order to further her agenda. She is, in fact, extremely adept at manipulating Peter in the first season, as he sees her as just a child playing on her whims, rather than a cunning empress setting in motion plans to stage a coup against him. For example, when Peter is unable to barter a peace with his Swedish counterpart, it is Catherine who manages to arrive at an accord that would benefit both countries. She tells Peter “you talked in your sleep last night and you had a brilliant plan” (1x08, 39:16-39:20) and then moves on to negotiate with the Swedish royals herself with intelligent and compelling arguments. In fig. 9 we see her as she stands between the men explaining her plan, a mastermind slowly but surely claiming her spot in a man’s world, going so far as to physically place herself between the two rulers. While Peter later tells her that he knows he does not talk in his sleep, and thanks her for her intervention, he still does not see her greater plan to overthrow him and take control of Russia.



Figure 9: Screen Capture. Catherine Explaining her Plan. 1x08. 42:18. *The Great* (2020)

Emily, on the other hand, fully rejects this tactic and relishes in being sent to the sidelines. She, unlike Catherine, does not use other people’s preconceptions and assumptions in her favour; rather she sometimes seems not to notice what others say about her, or ignores it to see the best in others. In the second season, when Emily is introduced to Sam Bowels (the

editor of the *Springfield Republican*, who wants to publish her poems, portrayed by Finn Jones), she is elated. Later on, at a party, which Sam attends together with Emily, every person there insinuates that the two are having a sexual relationship, as Sam is rumoured to sleep with all female authors he takes under his wing. Emily does not readily believe this rumour and asks Sue whether it is true or not. When Sue denies its truthfulness Emily believes her and continues her professional relationship with the editor, oblivious to the gossip and his flirtatious ways. Only later in the season does Emily finally understand the true nature of Bowels and severs their partnership.

Emily's propensity to believe the best of others and her unwillingness to give weight to other's opinions does not mean, however, that she is never aware of the objectification process imposed on her or that she does not fight against it. For instance, once she discovers Edward's decision regarding inheritance, Emily organises a meeting with her siblings and tells them:

[Emily] He gets the house, all the assets and us. We are just another piece of property.
 [Lavinia] Well, I mean, yeah. I figured. When you don't have a husband and your father dies, you belong to your brother. It is a patriarchy after all.
 [Emily] Okay. Well, I am not just gonna sit here and let my brother take control of my life.
 [Austin] I don't want to control your life (3x09, 04:53-05:17).

While many consider women as property, like Edward, Austin does not agree. Emily, who previously defended her father against her brother's attacks, finally sees the error of her father's ways. While she was always aware of his deeply patriarchal notions and throughout the series chafes against his rules regarding women and publishing, only now does she see that he will never change enough to give her the freedom she craves. While Edward has accepted her career and stands beside her in her decision not to marry, he still sees her as his property: as something to be owned and controlled. Emily tells her siblings: "Our father has been a tremendous disappointment. [...] He has behaved exactly and at all times in accordance with contemporary social expectations and norms, which is to say, he's been a real asshole" (time s3ep9 6.00).

Emily follows this moment of realisation with a request. As she is unable to gain her freedom any other way, she asks Austin to make her and Lavinia a promise: “so, Austin, will you promise us that you will not be the same kind of man our father was [PAUSE] That no matter what the laws of society say, as long as we live together, you will treat us with respect and you will give us the freedom, all the freedom that we deserve?” (s3ep9 6.40). To this he answers that they can always count on him. Austin has thus become the embodiment of social change, fighting and protecting his sisters in the areas of life in which they are still not able to stand up for themselves. This request is the only way Emily has to fight against her own objectification and the ownership imposed on her and, while this state of ownership is still implied, Austin has now promised to respect his sisters’ wishes and allow them to reclaim their agency in this regard.

As we have seen, each main character has been relegated to being an object, rather than a person. A woman’s personal ideas, beliefs, and desires do not matter, and as such she is stripped of her personhood. If the woman is an object, she has no freedom, as society continuously restricts any autonomy and free agency. Following this train of thought, it is important to note that “women’s object-like status is not a natural fact, but rather a consequence of gender inequality. In structuring our world in such a way as to accommodate this allegedly natural fact about women, we sustain the existing situation of gender inequality” (Papadaki). Haslanger states that:

Once we have cast women as submissive and deferential “by nature”, then efforts to change this role appear unmotivated, even pointless. Women who refuse this role are anomalies; they are not “normal” observers, and so their resistance, recalcitrant observations, etc. may be ignored. [...] These reflections suggest that what appeared to be a “neutral” or “objective” ideal, viz., the procedure of drawing on observed regularities to set constraints on practical decision making, is one which will, under conditions of gender hierarchy reinforce the social arrangements on which such hierarchy depends (35)

Catherine and Emily, in addition to being objectified by the men in their lives (and sometimes the women), are also relegated to their role and status. The efforts of the women in these tv

shows to escape the bounds imposed on them as women are undercut by the men around them that often resort to a *norm of aperspectivity* in order to maintain their powers as objectifiers and reinforce the belief that the differences between genders are due to the different natures of men and women, putting distance between the objectifier and the objectified (Papadaki).⁶ A *norm of aperspectivity* means that the objectifier's view is not influenced by his or her circumstances and they in turn have no influence on the outcome of what they are observing. For example, if we follow the scheme of objectification proposed by Haslanger, in *The Great*:

- a. Peter views and treats Catherine as a womb for his use;
- b. Peter desires Catherine to be submissive and object-like and forces her to submit;
- c. Peter believes that Catherine and all women are in fact submissive and object-like;
- d. Peter believes that Catherine and all women are in fact submissive and object-like by nature (102-103)

Throughout both series this norm is not only challenged by the topics discussed, but also by the visual aspect of this narrative medium, as the viewer's perspective of the story is shifted from a purely male gaze to a female one, by use of musical background, particular framing and closeups. In fig. 10 we see an hallucination Emily has after a confrontation with her father regarding the publishing of her poems. In this hallucination Emily is in a circus and Austin, who is the master of ceremonies, announces "the greatest freak of them all: a female poet" (1x07, 23:38-23:47). The image that follows is a great representation of the feeling of alienation Emily experiences: she is put on display as a freak and the tattoos on her body are the representation of the perceptions of others forced on her when she breaks away from the mould. The viewer understands that the label 'freak' is not innate, but imposed on Emily, and that this could be a virtue rather than a flaw, as all the spectators of the circus applaud her. The

⁶ Haslanger discusses this norm in terms of Assumed Objectivity, which presents four sub-norms. For a more complete overview see Haslanger, Sally. "On Being Objective and Being Objectified" *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt, Routledge, 2019. pp. 32-38.

show thus challenges, through imagery, the objectification of Emily and pushes the spectator to analyse their own notions and preconceptions surrounding the ‘nature’ of women.



Figure 10: Screen Capture. Emily Performing at the Circus. 1x07. 24:28. *Dickinson* (2019)

2.3 On Marriage

As I have already mentioned, objectification is not the only process through which women’s subjection is continuously enforced. The institution of marriage, in fact, also plays an important role in maintaining the status of women as submissive to the men in their lives. As Lavinia aptly puts it in Dickinson “I think marriage is just a patriarchal system designed to make women less autonomous. You become your husband’s property. You have to bear his children. You even have to take his name. What if I don’t want a last name. What if I just want to be Vinnie?” (2x03, 11:52-12:08). In both shows we see how marriage is portrayed as a central and necessary goal for women following traditional feminine socialization, meaning “the set of practices which instills in girls the gentle virtues of femininity along with homespun feminine goals” (Meyers 619). However, as many feminist scholars tend to agree “feminine socialization is crucial to the persistence of women’s subjection” (Meyers 619).

At the beginning of *The Great*, as we have seen, Catherine is elated to be getting married, thinking it a grandiose love affair, but when she finds her husband to be more than

lacking, her perspective on marriage changes. Where marriage often signals the conclusion of a story, for Catherine, when we look at her story, her marriage to Peter is only the beginning. Like for many other women in both shows, marriage represents for Catherine merely a contract, a protection, that can be used in one's favour. This is also the case for Sue in *Dickinson*, who marries Austin to remain close to Emily and be safe, as her whole family is dead, and for Marial in *The Great*, who marries her very young cousin as he is her father's heir and without him, she would be destitute. Marriage thus, is presented in both shows as an institution that can offer a path towards a better life, while at the same time remaining a tool for oppression.

It is interesting to note that while many women in both shows agree that marriage is not necessarily based on love and commitment for them, but rather on financial and social security, some of them do not see marriage as an oppressive tool in general, but rather associate issues of lack of autonomy and agency to having married badly. When Catherine is finally able to create a school for girls, the women of the court are reluctant to send their daughters as they explain:

[Svenska] While our love and admiration for you is huge, your unique nature is not something we wish to replicate in our girls.

[Tatyana] It will make marrying them harder.

[Catherine] What?

[Marial] No one wants a fierce wife.

[Svenska] Exactly, and marrying well is everything.

[Tatyana] My father used to say, if you know when it's time to shut your mouth and when it's time to open your legs, you will find a good match and your life be assured (2x02, 27:30-27:56).

Marrying well, thus, becomes the main goal for women in that age, having little choice other than conforming to societal norms. However, interestingly, even the selection of a suitor often falls onto a man in the family, rather than on the future wife to be. The lack of choice that seems so clear to Catherine, as she incredulously states "I can't believe they don't want better things for their daughters" (2x02, 28:13-28:15), seems lost on others because, as Marial

reminds, her women at court “think better things come from better husbands” (2x02, 28:16-28:18).

This differentiation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ marriages then, only aids in obscuring the limiting nature of this institution in regard to women. As Rich aptly explains:

We have been stalled in a maze of false dichotomies which prevents our apprehending the institution as a whole [...] Within the institution exist, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 37)

The solution to this problem, for Catherine, then is to find ways to reclaim some collective power, “to change the systems women live by, take power from men, and give it to us” (2x08, 25:11-25:15). While the show does not yet explore this in more detail, Catherine does explain what her idea is for changing the dynamics between women and men, stating “[Catherine]- Think of it! A woman with the right to divorce a man. Think of the freedom that would give women who suffer violence, drunkenness, men rutting on them while sweating and smelling of cheese” (2x08, 24:46-24:58). Shifting systems of power will become the way Catherine attempts to regain agency for herself and others, as we will see in the following chapter.

For Emily, in *Dickinson*, while she at times contemplates marriage to escape her father’s home, marriage is not an option mainly because her love lies elsewhere. This does not mean that she is also very aware of how marriage can be used to maintain women’s subjugation, as she more than once states that marriage would impede her pursuit of writing. However, Emily hints at the fact that this would not be an issue, were she only able to marry who she loves. While they share a tender moment Emily tells Sue “I wish I could just marry you” (1x02, 1:39-1:41). This sentiment is enforced time and time again as the two speak of their love for each other and the impossibility of living their relationship in the open. Marriage, thus, not only places women in a subservient position, but also enforces what Rich calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 11), thus, erasing any manifestation of

queerness in both women and men alike. Luckily for Emily, her father never forced her to marry and she is able to maintain her relationship with Sue, even if they are forced to keep it hidden and will face many struggles due to the secrecy they have to maintain.

2.4 On Mental Illness

Lastly, it is also interesting to note that, in both shows, the moment women are actually able to understand the tools of oppression they are subjected to and begin to contest them, they are often described as mad. This idea of madness is then inextricably linked with either a complete disinterest or an incapability to comprehend traditional female socialisation practices. Catherine is often described as ‘mad’, ‘delusional’, even called a ‘witch’, especially when she is showcasing behaviour that is in contrast with the social norms. The same happens to Emily, who is labelled a ‘weirdo’, a ‘freak’, a ‘lunatic’, often described as ‘crazy’ when others talk about her unwillingness to conform.

The categorization of women as mentally ill has long been a tool to erase women’s agency and limit their autonomy, as is showcased in *Dickinson* when the family goes to visit a lunatic asylum for women, for which Edward might become a trustee. This particular episode then explores and denounces the ways madness has been used to preserve women’s subjugated state. Emily’s mother, when the trip is announced, is very sceptical, thinking her husband wants to lock her away and tells her daughter: “It’s the oldest trick in the 19th century playbook. Tired of your wife? Marriage gone stale? She had a bit too much to drink on your birthday, put on her wedding dress and fell down the stairs? Just say she’s mad and lock her away” (3x06, 03:31-03:41). Once the family arrives at the location, they are lead on tour by the head doctor who tells them:

[Head Doctor] You’ll find our girls here receive state-of-the-art care. We have a very progressive understanding of mental sickness, covering all modern female illnesses, ranging from exhaustion, overeducation, menstruation, laziness, being unmarried

[Lavinia] Being unmarried is a mental illness? no, yeah, that feels right
 [Head Doctor] To acute mania, chronic mania, nymphomania and melancholia. It's more commonly known as grief (3x06, 07:33-08:02).

It is then immediately made clear to the viewer that mental illness has long been used to marginalise women that did not conform to the norms of traditional society and that every manifestation of this non-conformity then is labelled as madness.

After exchanging only a few words with Emily, in fact, the doctor attempts to convince Edward to institutionalise his daughter as he is sure she is a lunatic. Edward refuses more than once, stating that she is not mad, but rather just a poet. Emily, who in the meantime has gone to explore the asylum further, finds a group of women held in the basement. She soon realises that the 'madness' they have been diagnosed with is nothing more than disobedience, as one person is there for identifying as a man, another for protesting for women's right to vote. As the women are kept in terrible conditions, not allowed to bathe and eat regularly, read or write, Emily decides to break them free. Once she storms the hall with the other women, Emily tells her father:

Pardon my sanity in a world insane [...] Dad, you need to know the truth about this place. Women are being kept here against their will. They are misdiagnosed, abused, manipulated, over-medicated [...] Dad this is not a progressive institution. In fact, I doubt places like this will survive in the future. They are a crime against humanity. They will be looked back on as relics" (3x06, 26:44-26:06)

Emily, thus, denounces the practice of using institutionalisation as a means to diminish women's autonomy and agency.

Madness, however, is also presented as a way towards freedom. In *The Great*, for example, Elizabeth is often described as strange and mad. Nonetheless, this categorization is framed in a positive manner by Elizabeth herself. When Catherine notes "you seem to live by your own rules", Elizabeth tells her "it helps that they think I am mad" (1x04, 48:44-48:49). In her case being side-lined and overlooked as simply 'mad' grants her the space to explore whatever she may desire, while her violent streak, her keen eye for politics, and her ability to

manoeuvre those around her ensures she is able to remain in a position of power within the court. By exploring the complexity of the institutions, practices and processes through which the state of women's subjugation is maintained, both *Dickinson* and *The Great* illustrate how objectification, marriage and the characterization as mentally ill are not necessarily stable threats of removal of agency, but are continuously used to undermine women's capacity to have and maintain free agency over their own lives at all.

As I will analyse in the following chapter, these two shows, thus, defy the notion of women being submissive and deferential, by portraying the lead characters as they fight against the constraints imposed on them by society and their efforts to regain agency, in one case through the pursuit of power and in the other through the pursuit of a career. Elizabeth puts this sentiment into words in the second season of *The Great*, as she states "the joy of being a woman is knowing that we have unseen and unacknowledged depths and strength beyond anything a man will ever know, and knowing that, when we feel like it, we can outplay a man on his own field" (2x04, 38:27-38:44), which is exactly the complexity of womanhood these shows illustrate. Hence, the aim of *The Great* and *Dickinson* is to change the perceived roles of women and dismantle the gender hierarchy presented at the beginning of the shows, resonating more, as a result, with modern audiences.

Chapter 3: Agency Reclaimed

In the previous chapter we have seen various ways women are denied agency, such as norm aperspectivity, objectification and the institution of marriage, and some of the ways the main characters attempt to fight against it. While I have spoken mostly of the main characters in both tv-series, they are not the only women present in the narrative. Indeed, every female character portrayed shows another facet of what it means to be a woman in a deeply patriarchal society, which allows the creators to explore different manners of dealing with lack of agency. This chapter will focus on how agency is understood by different women and how they approach reclaiming it.

In the first subsection I will explore how the concept of normative competence is presented in *Dickinson* and *The Great* through the representation of a number of secondary characters. In the following subsections, then, I will move onto an analysis of how Catherine and Emily actively pursue agency, focusing on what form agency takes on for them, what steps they take and who or what stands in their way. Therefore, I will first explore how, in *The Great*, power becomes the vehicle through which Catherine attempts to reclaim her agency, moving then towards an analysis of how, in *Dickinson*, Emily views writing as a tool for empowerment and a vehicle to maintain her agency.

It is important to note that both tv-series represent the pursuit of agency not as a linear journey, but as an ebb and flow that finds these women constantly fighting against the powers trying to wrestle them into boxes of servitude. The writers and directors are able to accurately represent the struggle of women in society partly because of the serial-episodic nature of the medium chosen for these narratives. Unlike a movie or a novel, the tv-series format allows for more space to explore multiple strains of narration on different levels and to delve deeper in the psychology of the characters presented, as we have seen in Chapter One.

3.1 On Normative Competence

According to accounts of modern and contemporary philosophers concerning the concept of free agency “it is standardly assumed that what constitutes our free agency, what our freedom *is*, in no way depends on the existence or character of either our relationship with other persons or our social situation” (Benson 49). In addition to this, free agency has also been viewed “to lack any essential normative content” (Benson 49) and “the modern tradition has taken it for granted that the primary constitutive condition of free agency is the agent’s having the power to control, regulate, or rule over her conduct” (Benson 49).

However, as we have seen in the previous sections, women in these shows are limited in the actions they can take, indicating that these core assumptions regarding free agency do not take into account aspects of women’s lives and oppression, their moral and political experiences. For this reason, Benson in his article “Feminist second thoughts about free agency”, starting from these assumptions, offers an alternative conception of free agency, not only in terms of control, but also of normative competence, understood as “an array of abilities to be aware of applicable normative standards, to appreciate those standards, and to bring them competently to bear in one’s evaluations of open courses of actions” (54).⁷ When this definition is used in regard to women who have been socialised in an oppressive, sexist society “a normative-competence approach apparently implies that most women in this society face special difficulties in the task of becoming fully free agent” (Benson 57) and it “emphasizes the immediate significance that normative domains which are in a sense external to the agent have for her freedom” (Benson 59).

Lavinia, in this regard, is an incredibly interesting character. In the first season of *Dickinson*, she more than once remarks that her desires align with what she is supposed to want/be good at in that society: she wants to be married, to be good at chores, to have a nice

⁷ For more on ‘normative competence’ refer to pp. 55- 56 in “Second thoughts about free agency” by Paul Benson.

appearance and to act appropriately. Nonetheless, Lavinia is constantly dismissed by her parents and her siblings, her mother especially. In the first episode of the show, when a suitor arrives for Emily, Lavinia asks her mother “why don't I get to have any suitors?” to which her mother answers “because I'm not trying to marry you off. You're very good at housework” (1x01, 04:21-04:26). In her case, her ability to work inside the constraints society imposes on her seems to render her simultaneously indispensable in the house and invisible in every other aspect. As a consequence, her autonomy and agency are taken away, just like Emily's, even though what Lavinia wishes to do with her life is very much in line with the norms of the time. She is thus initially relegated to the side-lines within her family as if she is simple of mind and lacking any character.

However, this is not at all true as we see her character develop throughout the series. Lavinia often demands to be heard and stands by her convictions and desires, even though she is regularly ignored. The message to the viewer is clear: if you are a woman, you are damned to be invisible, no matter if you conform to society's standards or not. Lavinia is portrayed as the odd, lonely, maybe a bit crazy, cat-lady, who often makes things for her cat. Her oddness, in a sense, can be attributed for a contemporary audience to the fact that, in contrast to Emily, Lavinia at the beginning does not pursue independence, but rather the things we are pushed to believe diminish a woman's independence. Nonetheless, is it not the right of all women to choose whatever life they want? Her agency is denied as much as every other woman portrayed in the show.

Throughout the first season we see Lavinia pursue what she wants, and when her reality comes crashing down, asserting her independence in any way she can. Following her parents' indifference towards her desire to marry, Lavinia begins a relationship with a man named Joseph (Gus Halper), exploring her sexuality in what she thinks is a safe environment. Convinced that her budding romance is something more than just a physical relationship she

gives a naked portrait of herself to Joseph, only to discover he shared it with many in town. While she is attending an art class, her classmates tell her of Joseph's betrayal and she wonders:

[Lavinia] Why would he do that?

[Jane] Why wouldn't he? Joseph's a creep. We all know that. The question is, why would you expose yourself like that?

[Toshiaki] Yeah, Lavinia. Haven't you ever heard of modesty? (1x09, 23:43-23:54)

This scene has a dual purpose, to comment on the contemporary issue of sharing nudes without the consent of the subject of the picture, and to set up Lavinia's character development in season two. In fact, in the final episode of the first season, when Joseph approaches her, clumsily apologises, and asks her to marry him, thinking that this is what she wants, Lavinia squarely refuses stating "It's not a good time for me to get into a relationship. I need to focus on my cat" (1x10, 17:49-17:54). With this statement Lavinia embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-actualization, which she tentatively started earlier in the season.

In a sense Lavinia has thus completed the first step towards becoming a free agent.

Benson states that:

In order to become a person who can be disclosed publicly in her actions, a woman must be cognizant of the inappropriateness of a woman's being too self-disclosive or publicly present. The seeming contradiction within women's normative competence in relation to the oppressive standards of a sexist society is that the very agent who would be free risks debilitation and disrespect in the course of striving to attain recognition as the genuine author of her acts and to enjoy the basic respect which attaches to that status (58)

Lavinia does not refuse Joseph's marriage proposal because she no longer has an interest in marriage, but rather because she does not want to marry him specifically, which society would dictate after such a scandal. She has become aware that to implement her free agency means breaking away from the oppressive standards of her society at least to a degree.

In the second season of the show, Lavinia's newfound sense of self is tested with the arrival of Mr. Shipley (Pico Alexander), who has returned to town with the hope of marrying her as she is "the most pure, simple, quiet, traditional" (2x01, 10:23-10:26) woman he knows.

Multiple times, however, Lavinia tells him she has changed and that she is wrong for him. Through this romantic narrative arc, the producers of the show present the struggle between agency and conformity, in this case as it pertains to marriage. Shipley underlines the desire for an old-fashioned wife, while Lavinia stresses the idea that she has truly changed. As she tells him:

I know now that we're engaged, you think I'm gonna become this tame, obedient housewife who always stays inside and never goes to parties and gets all of her satisfaction in life from darning your socks. But you're wrong. I am not the boring Dickinson sister. People don't even realize this, but I am a lot like Emily. I'm wild and creative (2x05, 08:18-08:41)

Lavinia, who is now within reach of conformity, which is exactly what Shipley desires, decides to fully reject it. When she tells her mother she does not want to marry, however, Lavinia's desires are once more pushed to the side-lines, as her mother pushes her to remain engaged to Ship. It is only at the end of the season that Lavinia breaks off the engagement when Ship decides to move to the South as she does not want to be on the wrong side of history.

As Benson states women's freedom often seem to be fractured: "it can be attributed to the alienating, gender-bound expectations of oppressive social institutions and practices" (59) as the norms women are expected to understand and exercise are contradictory to maintaining one's own agency. This sense of alienation is very prominent in Lavinia's character, as in the third season, after having embraced her otherness, she regrets not having married as the war has greatly diminished her options for suitors. This oscillation between wanting to conform, rejecting society's standards for women, and then again having a desire to conform, greatly exemplifies the alienation Lavinia feels towards her own agency which Emily also feels, but is able to resolve as we will see. Lavinia thus is double coded as both a rebel and a conformist.

Another two characters we must mention when speaking of the effects of normative competence are the mothers of Emily and Catherine. Emily's mother, for example, is obsessed with chores, being a good wife and marrying off Emily, and seems to be unable to form an

emotional bond with her children if she is not speaking of womanly duties. This might be explained by the fact that she never wanted to have children, as she reveals in an emotional scene with Emily. When she married Edward, however, she took on the role imposed on her and clung onto what was expected of her, as is exemplified by the reverence with which she treats the book she received as a girl on the day of her marriage, “The frugal wife”, which she calls her “companion” (1x07, 11:34). Emily’s mother, thus, establishes her agency through her normative competence: her happiness is linked to others’ dependence on her. She later also attempts to impose these same roles onto her daughter and daughter-in-law, exemplifying how “the oppressed are co-opted through their own short-run rational choices to reinforce the long-run oppression of their social group” (Cudd, 21–22). The same is true for Catherine’s mother, who is horrified by Catherine’s coup. Joanna (Gillian Anderson), baffled by her daughter’s inability to remain within the boundaries women must abide by, remarks “You were born to be a royal wife. You were trained to be a royal wife. Be one and stop this, and live. Darling, your sisters can do it, why can't you?” (2x08, 48:24-48:40). For Joanna, normative competence is central to leading a good life as a woman and when Catherine does not show signs of wanting to conform, she calls her crazy and attempts to subvert the coup by herself.

Normative competence, thus, becomes a useful tool through which some women attempt to maintain their agency, even when it is restricted by society. Applying this conceptualisation of agency can then help us better understand the struggle women face as they feel alienated from their own agency and how this alienation manifest itself. Normative competence, however, is not the only manner agency is reclaimed in these series. In the following sections we will see how agency takes on different forms and how Catherine and Emily reclaim their agency and deal with their feelings of alienation.

3.2 *On Agency as Power*

Before moving towards an analysis of Catherine's reclamation of agency through the pursuit of power, we must understand what power means and how it has been viewed in and outside feminist theory. Power, in both political and social theory, is a very contested concept. However, two main interpretations of the concept of power arise: one that understands power as power-over others, while the other understands it as power-to do something (Allen). Max Weber, for example, defines power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (53), and therefore as power-over others. Hanna Pitkin, on the other hand, suggests that due to the etymological origin of the word, power can be defined as "something – anything – which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something. Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal" (276).⁸ The literature surrounding the concept of power also makes a distinction on the basis of an individualistic conception or a systemic conception of power. Weber defines power in action-theoretical terms (Saar 10), meaning in terms of actions and the inclinations of individual actors. Haugaard, on the other hand, presents a systemic conception of power as "the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action" (425). However, whether we conceptualise power in individualistic or systematic terms, the "basic scenario remains individualistic at the methodological level: power operates on individuals as individuals, in the form of a 'bringing to action' or external determination" (Saar 14).

So far, we have focused on general approaches to power, yet in later years many feminist scholars have turned to a new conceptualization of power, understanding it in terms of empowerment, while moving away from "putatively masculine notions of power-over"

⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the etymology consult "power, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/149167. Accessed 22 May 2023.

(Allen). Held affirms that “the power of a mothering person to empower others, to foster transformative growth, is a different sort of power from that of a stronger sword or a dominant will” (209), thus proposing that there are multiple ‘types’ of power and that one derives from women’s ability for childbirth and child rearing. Miller, on the other hand, proposes that power is “*the capacity to produce a change* – that is, to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B” (241). Along this line Hoagland characterises power as “power-from-within”, defined as “the power of ability, of choice and engagement. It is creative; and hence it is an affecting and transforming power but not a controlling power” (118)

Following all these definitions of power, in *The Great Catherine* desires to obtain power-to and as a consequence must obtain power-over, her primary aim being obtaining the ability to empower, not only herself but also others by giving life to her vision for a better world. Power then also becomes the medium through which the empress reclaims her agency over her life. If she is able to obtain power, she will no longer be pushed to the side-lines and caged in her own marriage, but rather become a free agent, whose choices, actions and ideas are fully and unequivocally controlled only by herself. Catherine’s want for freedom, not only for herself, but also for others is clear from the beginning of the show. In fact, once she decides to stage a *coup d’état*, she often relays her plans for Russia to potential supporters, simultaneously gathering supporters and reminding the viewer of her main objective. Thus, the coup becomes the main arc of the first season, and the themes of power and change are used in the singular episode arcs, so as to bring the viewer along in Catherine's journey to obtain power.

The first time the viewer sees Catherine explain her ideas in the show is in the second episode of the first season, when she attempts to convince Orlo to join her cause. The empress barges into his rooms and asks him:

[Catherine] Would you not like to see a strong, vibrant Russia, alive with ideas, humane and progressive, where people live with dignity and purpose?

[Orlo] I would. And a talking pig, and a dog that cooks omelettes. But I suspect I will die disappointed.

[Catherine] Well, there's an aspiration, to die disappointed. Good luck with that. I suspect you will make it.

[Orlo] Empress, I have looked at the situation and at what I can achieve within reason.

[Catherine] What's the point in believing in something if you will not act for it? I, too, believe in reason. in a nation ruled by it. But I believe only action and passion will achieve it. I will not live my life on the side-lines, some half-hearted coward. I promised myself a great love. That didn't work out. Then I realised...it is a great life that I want. (1x02, 45:17-46:15)

While this impassioned speech is not enough to convince Orlo, after he is confronted once more with Peter's cruelty and irrationality, he officially becomes Catherine's co-conspirator. From her passionate speech it is clear that Catherine does not want power for power's sake, to control and oppress, but rather to bring change and progress. Her discourse also serves the secondary purpose of showing the viewer what agency really means for Catherine. In the first episode of the show, we see a naive girl who wants only one thing: a great love. This desire is most likely born from her circumstances. As a woman, love is the only thing she is taught to desire as anything else will be out of her reach. Once Catherine understands the reality of her marriage with Peter, she is finally pushed to look further into her heart for what she really wants and start to work towards that goal: changing Russia.

The empress' actions throughout the show also reinforce this desire for change. While the coup only happens in the last episode of the season, Catherine more than once fights for change wherever she can, convincing Peter to bring art and science to the court, manipulating him to arrive to a peaceful solution to the war with Sweden, advocating for women by helping choose a Patriarch and the serfs by trying inoculation when others would not. Miller states "there is enormous validity in women's *not* wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used. Rather, women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others" (247–248), which is exactly what Catherine envisions, and the reason people follow her and support the coup.

Peter, on the other hand, believes he is entitled to power-over and he shows this over and over as his answer for everything is torture and violence. For example, when it is discovered that pox has broken out in the servants' quarters, he gives the order to burn them all, rather than try inoculation. In another instance, after being poisoned, Peter announces that he has changed and says "I want to be the most loved ruler in all of Russian history. I am happy to hear anyone's problems with me. Step forward now. Anyone. I'm open to being better, so...Oh, don't worry about the bodies" (1x06, 05:01-05:24). In fig 11 we see Peter just as he is making this speech, while bodies swing in the background, portraying a gruesome picture and underlining the paradox of his words compared to his actions.



Figure 11: Screen Capture. Peter Addresses the Court. 1x06. 05:07. *The Great* (2020)

Catherine is determined to bring change using the least amount of violence possible, because, unlike Peter, she realises that there are other ways to obtain favour and support. In the opening scenes of 1x07, after having successfully brought art to the palace she observes:

The raw power of art... Once your mind fires, your heart's moved. Ideas open, and the warriors are the people themselves. You can cut a man's head off, or you can change what's in a man's head. Do the latter, you have a warrior for your cause. Do the former, you have...a head with a lot of blood pouring out (1x07, 00:02-00:23)

Thus, the struggle for power between the two lead characters also becomes a symbol for the struggle between different modes of obtaining and exercising power. Hannah Arendt, in her treatise *On Violence*, affirms that "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but

to act in concert. Power is never a property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group keeps together” (44). Once the court is disillusioned with Peter’s ways, they soon side with Catherine, while only a handful truly remain loyal to the emperor.

Even Elizabeth, Peter’s aunt, in the end stands with the empress believing in her because she is not a man, and thus does not have certain ‘manly’ traits. Her virtue and power lie in being a woman, where so many would rather think the opposite. When she finds out about the coup and Catherine asks her what she will do she says: “for a moment, merely step back and revel in the sight of a wild young woman, going ‘what the fuck, I have a better idea’ and reaching for it” (1x10, 16:34-16:44). Elizabeth then only asks that Catherine not kill her nephew. Later on, in the first episode of the second season, while everyone participating in the coup is trying to convince the empress to kill her husband to finally take full control, Elizabeth is again the voice of reason. She tells Catherine that she needs Peter to abdicate to legitimise her rule, while at the same time maintaining her belief that violence is not the answer. Elizabeth reminds her:

and if you cannot take a life and still get what you want, then why take a life? Only men are dumb enough to do that. It’s why they are endlessly creating their own destruction. They’re like little pandas trapped in a barrel and they all have knives and cut each other up, rather than using the knives to cut open the barrel and run free (2x01, 35:41-36:03)

Elizabeth thus becomes not only one of Catherine’s fiercest supporters, but the woman that is able to guide her through the treacherous waters of being a ruler, advising her truthfully when she needs it, advocating for peace when possible and for a firm hand when necessary.

Catherine is forced to overcome a number of obstacles before gaining power and later, when she has obtained it, in order to maintain it. In the first season she deals with her own doubts regarding her abilities, the doubts and underestimation of those around her and in the end, she is forced to sacrifice her own personal happiness, personified in her lover Leo. Once she has gained power, in the second season, her co-conspirators are the ones that start to doubt

her. The ideas that had inspired them so, her idealist nature, become a nuisance as they feel they no longer have control over her. At first, they blame it on her grief, then on her pregnancy, then on her rebellious nature. In the end, however, Catherine prevails, and although she has experienced some failures, like the serf rebellion after she too hastily frees them, she has demonstrated an ability to adapt and learn from her mistakes, without compromising her ideas and beliefs, bringing change to Russia and maintaining the agency she has so long longed for. She is no longer, as a woman, pushed to the side-lines, but rather a free agent whose desire to empower others ensures she is able to control her own life and bring change for those around her whose agency has also been denied.

3.3 On Agency as Writing

In *Dickinson* Emily's journey towards reclaiming agency is not as straightforward as Catherine's. While Catherine almost immediately identifies her purpose and the way to achieve it, Emily's journey is much more tumultuous. I have previously stated that Emily's attempts to establish her autonomy through the pursuit of a career, career meaning "a profession for which one trains and which is undertaken as a permanent calling" (*Merriam-Webster.Com*). Emily, from the beginning, states that her purpose in life is to become a great writer, as her poems are the medium through which she not only expresses herself, but through which establishes her independence in a world where she has very restricted agency over her own life. But why exactly is Emily's journey more tumultuous than Catherine's? This is due mainly to the fact that her understanding of what it means to be a great writer shifts throughout the series. In the three seasons of the show, in fact, we see three different seasonal narrative arcs involving her relationship to her writing. In the first season we see Emily tentatively establishing herself as an author, taking the first steps into publishing, as it is the only way she feels she will be able to become a true writer. In the second season, however, she begins to question the need for

fame and recognition and, as a consequence, the need for her poems to be published. In the third season, ultimately, she understands that her worth as a writer lies not in the opinion of others but within her, and doing so discovers a new depth to her art.

In the first episode of the show Emily publishes one of her poems for the first time and announces it to her family, expecting them to be proud of her. However, her parents' reaction is quite the opposite, as we have seen previously. In fact, Edward Dickinson is vehemently opposed to women pursuing a career or even obtaining a higher education. Emily's father, thus, is the first villain in Emily's journey to obtain her agency. While Emily is sure that her purpose in life is to be a writer, her sense of worth as a writer is still deeply bound to the opinions of others, especially her father. When she has a vision of Death (Wiz Khalifa), he assures her that she will succeed in the end, saying:

[Death] My darling...you'll be the only Dickinson they talk about in 200 years. I promise you that.

[Emily] Even if my poems are never published?

[Death] Publicity is not the same thing as immortality.

[Emily] Immortality is nothing. All it takes is being very good and well-behaved and then you go to heaven.

[Death] See, that's not the kind I mean. Your type of immortality won't come from you following the rules. It's gonna come from you breaking them (1x01, 26:55-27:27)

It will take Emily the entirety of the show to fully understand the meaning of Death's words, as she first has to 'defeat' those who want to control her and force her to follow the patriarchal rules of her society.

In her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Rich expands on the characteristics of male power forced on women presented by Gough, such as "*to cramp [women's] creativeness*" and "*to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments*" (19). Rich explains that some of the modes through which women's creativeness is restrained are:

[the] definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female [...] so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity; [the] restriction of female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood; [...] the social and economic disruption of women's

creative aspirations; [the] erasure of female tradition (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 19)

Similarly, men’s power over women is also enforced through the exclusion of women from certain areas of culture “by means of noneducation of females; [...] sex-role tracking which deflects women from [...] ‘masculine’ pursuits; [...] discrimination against women in the professions” (19). These elements are all present in *Dickinson* and are used to restrain Emily’s pursuit of agency. For example, when Emily asks Edward why she cannot attend a lecture at the local college he answers: “a woman should receive an education, to be sure. But that education should not be the same as a man’s. And why should it when the role for which she is being trained is so very different? Look, an education prepares one for a career [Emily’s Mother] and the career of a woman is in the home” (1x02, 05:35-05:50). With this answer Edward reinforces the narrative that a woman's place is only in the home, that only male professions are valuable and that the education of those who are ‘lesser’ than men should be restricted. Emily is thus forced to “steal random bits of knowledge when no one is looking” (1x02, 06:19-06:22). She even says “maybe they’re scared that if they teach us how the world works, we’ll figure out how to take over” (1x02, 12:01-12:04).

While trying to navigate her situation and still accomplish a literary career, Emily publishes under her brother’s name and even contemplates marriage to escape her father’s house and control. When Emily meets Louisa May Alcott (Zosia Mamet), who we know is the author of *Little Women*, she asks for advice on how to become a writer in a male dominated world. Alcott tells her to try and use a man’s name and “write what sells” (1x08, 11:00) and to “never get married” (1x08, 11:15-11:16). It is clear that being a writer will mean having to compromise on certain aspects of her art and her life. Emily, thus, abandons the idea of marriage, which she only briefly considered after meeting her father’s associate Ben (Matt Lauria), who fully believes and supports her dreams of becoming a writer.

By the end of the first season Emily is finally confident in her identity as a writer and takes the first step in reclaiming her agency. During a confrontation on his wedding day Austin tells Emily that her poems are stupid as “the only real poems are the ones in books” (1x10, 16:05-16:07). After she is confined to her room Emily creates little booklets of her poems and when her father comes in, she tells him “I am a poet. [...] I am going to write hundreds, thousands of poems right here in this room. The greatest poems ever written. By Emily Dickinson. And there is nothing you can do to stop me” (1x10, 28:17-28:46). Edward, who has been undermining and blocking her efforts the entire season, finally accepts Emily’s desire to be a poet.

Even though Emily is now certain that she is a writer, she still feels that publishing is the path towards the recognition she needs. The main theme of the narrative arc of the second season is the danger of fame and authorial agency. After Sue introduces Emily to Sam Bowels, who promises to publish her poems, but takes quite a bit of time, Emily experiences an intense writer’s block. She tells Frederick Law Olmsted (Timothy Simons), the creator of Central Park:

[Emily] It’s an editor. I gave my poem to him. And now it’s like he holds my life in his hands. Like I’m the daisy and he’s the sun, and without the warmth of his approval, I can’t grow

[Frederick] Well that’s not good. Opinion is a flitting thing. It’s a hideous distraction from the beauty of your craft

[Emily] Okay. Then maybe I shouldn’t try and have an audience at all. Maybe fame is dangerous. I mean, I gave one poem to one man and now I have writer’s block.

[Frederick] The audience is irrelevant. The work itself is the gift, not the praise for it. Understand that and you’ll understand true mastery. [...] refuse to be the daisy and start being the sun (2x04, 23:03-24:13)

Emily starts to doubt her need for an audience, especially when, once her poem is published, she becomes invisible to the people around her. As she walks around the town unseen, she overhears the townspeople talking about her poem, not always in a positive manner. However, she soon realises that being invisible now does not mean anonymity forever.

In the final episode of the season, after having discovered Sam’s relationship with Sue, Emily, who already doubted his intentions, asks for her poems back, stating that she no longer

wishes to be published. Mr. Bowels at first thinks that her request is born out of false modesty, then he thinks she is simply jealous of Sue. However, Emily explains that she does not want to be part of his empire, not because of jealousy or emotion, but because, as she tells him “I had an empire! It was right up here. And then you stole it from me” (2x10, 05:52-06:01). Unfortunately, Sam seems incapable of recognizing Emily’s agency over her own work saying:

[Sam] Don’t let emotions get in the way of your career. That is always what happens to women.

[Emily] I need my poems.

[Sam] No Emily, you need me. See, a lot of people wouldn’t have even bothered with you. But I have, because I understand you. You’re weird and you’re warped and you’re sick and you’re strange, but I understand that as a woman, your art comes from all of that. Now, it would sadly be easy for the whole world to ignore you, but I won’t let them. No one would pay attention to you if it wasn’t for me pointing them in your direction. Trust me, you have no power without me (2x10, 06:41-07:20)

In his speech Mr. Bowels demonstrates a perfect example of the concept of paternalism defined as “the idea of a citizen or agency who is actually in a better position than the person herself to determine what is best for her and who, thus, should decide for her what she will do” (Hoagland 120).⁹ In addition to this, paternalism “encourages us to cease relying on our own ability to judge (and learn from our mistakes); hence, it encourages the loss of moral agency” (Hoagland 120). Emily, who has been subjected to paternalism numerous times before by some of the men in her life, does not relinquish her agency and fights back, at one point even physically trying to retrieve her poems telling Sam that he is “the Devil” to which he answers “I am a feminist” (2x10 08:24-08:27) before running away. While initially it seems that Emily has failed in her attempt to re-establish her authorial agency, the Dickinson’s maid Maggie (Darlene Hunt) was able to steal the poems back before Sam left running.

⁹ Hoagland explains that paternalism “(1) justifies interrupting or even abrogating a person’s integrity “for her own good”; (2) validates the idea that someone has a right, indeed an obligation, to dominate (protect, coerce, and so on) someone else under certain conditions and so force her into a certain dependency; and (3) gives credence to the idea that such dependency benefits an individual. Paternalism involves the idea that someone else knows better” (120)

In the third season, Emily's journey towards self-empowerment and reclamation of her own agency comes to an end. Against the backdrop of the Civil War Emily forges a new relationship to her own writing. She tells Death:

I want to do something that matters. And I mean something that really matters. It's bigger than fame or money. It's about actually changing people's lives. It's about helping them heal. Helping them survive. I want to be that little bird. That source of light in the darkness. I want to give people hope. [...] I believe poetry can be powerful. Even more powerful than you. I mean it. Death can tear people apart. Poetry can put them back together again (3x01, 06:57-07:35)

Following her declaration to Death, we see Emily writing furiously throughout the season. Her change in approach to her art is also underlined by how she approaches publishing in this narrative arc. She is not pushed and dragged into publishing by outside forces, but reaches out herself to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Gabriel Ebert), who the viewer might know to be the co-editor of the first two collections of her poems in real life ("Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911)"). The two never actually meet in the tv-series but the viewer discovers the fate of Emily's poems when Emily has a vision in which she travels to the future and meets Sylvia Plath (Chloe Fineman). Discovering she is quite famous in the future she turns to her sister Lavinia and says: "I thought I told you to burn all my poems when I died" and Lavinia replies "I knew you didn't mean it. I wasn't gonna let everyone forget my sister. And now look, in the future, you're actually famous" (3x07, 18:51-19:02).

Emily's writing no longer hinges on the opinions of others. She shares her work when she wants, with who she wants, her only goal expressing her feelings and thoughts brought on by the war. In the final episode she states: "You know what? Even if I can't change the world... I'm still gonna write. Even if no one ever cares. Even if it makes absolutely no difference that there was a person named Emily Dickinson who sat... In this little room... Day after day... And wrote things down just because she felt them" (3x10, 22:13-22:53). And with these words we see Emily ultimately reclaiming her autonomy, her agency, her power.

3.4 On Visual Representations of the Reclamation of Agency

In conclusion, it is important to note that the journey towards reclamation of agency is presented not only through the content and dialogue of these tv- shows, but also visually. In the first sequence of images, we see Emily in the first episode of the series, Emily in the last episode and lastly Emily in her final vision. In fig. 12 Emily is shown in a white dress, her hair loose, while she holds buckets of water. She is figuratively and literally weighed down by her circumstances, but still presented as innocent and unbound. The scene is dark and while Emily is surrounded by nature, it still feels oppressive, as if she is locked inside of her dark room. At this point she lacks any agency and authority over her life and this is translated into the scene. In fig. 13 we see a completely different version of Emily. She stands in the middle of a flowering garden in a light blue dress and hair bound. The scene is bright and full of vibrant colours. Emily is no longer presented as a young naive trapped girl, but a woman sure of her position after having regained her agency and become free, at least in spirit. Which brings us to fig. 14, in which Emily is on a beach in the open air, as she wears the dress designed with the purpose of not constricting her thinking or her writing. A notable feature of this dress is the lack of a corset, as Emily states: “I need this dress to let me live in every possibility. Corsets make too many things impossible...” (3x10, 15:54-16:00). The image evokes a feeling of

freedom and happiness and reminds the viewer of all Emily has achieved and will achieve as she is finally freed from the restraints imposed on her by society.



Figure 14: Screen Capture. Emily on the on the Beach. 3x10. 31:18. *Dickinson* (2019)



Figure 13: Screen Capture. Emily at the Well. 1x01. 02:36. *Dickinson* (2019)



Figure 12: Screen Capture. Emily in the Garden. 3x10. 00:26. *Dickinson* (2019)

In the second sequence of images, we see Catherine as she is portrayed at the beginning of the first episode of the first season, then towards the end of that same episode, and in the last episode of the season. In fig. 15 Catherine is shown smiling widely, dressed in bright yellow with her hair unbound. She is the perfect picture of naive happiness and youth. By the end of the episode, as the reality of her marriage with Peter becomes clear, the empress is shown in distress, while holding a knife to her own neck (see fig. 16). The scene is darker than the first, underlying the distressing predicament Catherine finds herself in. However, in the final episode of the season, as Catherine prepares to enact her coup, she is shown with a serious expression, dressed in bright pink with her hair carefully styled in an updo (see fig. 17). The colour of the dress underlines her femininity, as pink is considered a ‘woman’s colour’ for contemporary audiences. Catherine is presented here as a mature confident woman, ready to fight for power so that she might bring change to Russia and finally exert control over her own life. The coup, as we know, does not go as planned and Catherine still has a long journey towards freedom and autonomy ahead of her, but this does not take away from the striking and powerful figure she makes in this scene. She is no longer the naive girl presented at the beginning, but a woman ready to establish her place in a world that will not have one for her until she makes it for herself.



Figure 15: Screen Capture. Catherine on the Swing. 1x01. 01:12. *The Great* (2020)



Figure 17: Screen Capture. Catherine Holding a Knife to her Neck. 1x01. 47:55. *The Great* (2020)



Figure 16: Screen Capture. Catherine Preparing for the Coup. 1x10. 19:57. *The Great* (2020)

Simone de Beauvoir states that “woman is shown to us as enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be woman would mean to be the object, the Other” (82). In these works, this alienation is shown through the ebb and flow of the main characters pursuing agency, continually oscillating between what they want to do and what they feel they must do to succeed in a male dominated world. In the end, however, both main characters extricate themselves from the constraints of their society and embrace their status as Other, reasserting their agency over their own lives.

Conclusion

To conclude, as we have seen in the previous chapters, *The Great* and *Dickinson* are prime examples of the innovative approach to history certain period pieces have displayed in recent years. These two case studies explore the present through the prism of the past, by putting female-centric narratives at the forefront and adapting the lives of notable historical figures, while simultaneously encouraging the viewer to ponder contemporary and historical understandings regarding women's roles in society. As such, these works can be inserted in the broader tradition of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, which, as Rich explains:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” 18)

In order to present a detailed analysis of these two case studies and better understand their function, the thesis is divided in three chapters. The first chapter addresses the research question: *where can we position these shows in terms of broader artistic approach, genre and medium and what formal characteristics do they present?* The second and third chapter, then, address the second research question: *in what way do these works explore feminist matters such as agency, autonomy, gendered socialisation and power?*

In Chapter One, ‘The Case Study’, I thus presented an analysis of the medium, broader artistic tradition and formal characteristics these works display. I concluded that both *Dickinson* and *The Great* are infused by postmodern and neo-historical aesthetics, creating “new histories that are ‘authentic’ in that they recognise their own narratives as problematically constructed but continue to function as (fictionalised) narratives that have something to say about the past as well as the present” (Harris 194). By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, past and present, while employing creative anachronisms, intertextuality, interdiscursivity, Tony

McNamara and Alana Smith do just that. They have created period pieces that recognize and acknowledge the influence of the contemporary setting they were created in, and through which contemporary feminist matters are presented and explored. This was aided by the choice to present these narratives in the serial episodic form, which allows for more space for in depth characterization and the exploration of multiple intertwining narrative arcs, perfect to display the different ways the women presented in these two case studies fight against the constant threats to their agency and autonomy, shown as a continuous ebb and flow between removal and reclamation of free agency.

In Chapter Two and Three I analysed the two shows applying feminist concepts and theories relating to matters of autonomy, agency, power and the different manners women's subjugation is maintained. The chapter 'Agency Denied', focused on how women are characterised, what role they have in society and what tools are used to maintain women's subjugation, addressing the sub-question: *how do these works portray women and explore the different modes through which women's subjugation is maintained?* In both *The Great* and *Dickinson*, the lead characters are presented as defiant women who, aware of the limitations imposed on them as women, work against the social norms dictated by society. These limitations take form through the institution of marriage, the process of objectification, oppressive socialisation, and when all else fails the categorisation as mentally ill, which are used to maintain the gender hierarchy and limit women's autonomy and free agency by casting them as naturally submissive, deferential and object like.

Chapter three, 'Agency Reclaimed', thus, focused on the different manners women are portrayed reclaiming their agency within and outside of the confines imposed by their gender and status and the alienation they experience while doing so, addressing the sub-question: *how do the women portrayed in these shows reclaim their agency in the confines of their gender*

and status? Starting with an account of normative competence, a useful tool through which some women attempt to maintain the limited agency they have, I analysed the ways the character of Lavinia fluctuates between the desire to conform and the impulse to reject society's norms for women, becoming the perfect example of the alienation women feel towards their own agency. Then, I analysed the different ways the lead characters understand their agency and how they attempt to reclaim it.

Catherine's agency is manifested through the pursuit of power, specifically power to empower, as she is not only interested in reclaiming agency over herself, but also bringing lasting change to Russia for those around her whose agency has also been dismissed. The coup against her husband, thus, becomes a symbol for overthrowing oppressive regimes and systems, and as Catherine prevails, no longer side-lined due to her gender, she is able to establish herself as a free agent, exercising control over her own life. Emily's agency, on the other hand, takes the form of pursuit of a career. Her poems, through which she is able to express herself and establish her independence in a world where she has little power outside of her bedroom, become a symbol of her free agency. While Emily struggles to identify what it means for her to be a great author, perusing at first publication and outside validation, she is able to reclaim her agency once she separates her worth from the opinion of others and her writing once again becomes a means for self-expression and rebellion against the expectations society has in regards to women. In the end, both Catherine and Emily are thus able to extricate themselves from the constraints imposed on them due to their gender as they embrace their status as Other and the alienation they feel.

We can thus conclude that the central aim of *Dickinson* and *The Great* is to present female-centric narratives, through which they are able to reflect on the present through the prism of the past, drawing links between how women were perceived historically and in the

present. Elizabeth tells Catherine “most women die with an unsaid better idea in their hearts”

(1x10, 16:45-16:48). In a similar manner Sue tells Emily:

You deserve to be seen, Emily. You deserve to be published. And it’s just not fair, what happens to women. the minute we get a little bit of fame, or show the slightest amount of ambition, we get slapped with the nastiest comments. We get these targets on our backs. Well, I say to hell with all of that. You go out there and you own this. You worked for this (2x05, 15:51-16.18)

And it is exactly that which has remained ‘unsaid’ and ‘unseen’ that these two shows explore, working against the notions of women being deferential and submissive, fit only to fulfil certain roles. As a result, the shows attempt to dismantle the gender hierarchy presented at the beginning of the narratives by portraying the journey the two main characters embark on to reclaim their agency, their autonomy, their power.

Due to the space constraints, I was not able to present a detailed analysis of all of the themes presented in these two case studies, rather focusing on the themes of agency, autonomy and power through a feminist lens. In fact, a lot more could be said on the manner *Dickinson* and *The Great* explore madness, queerness, motherhood, status and class, how they portray complex emotions, how they present historical cultural and medical practices. One could also analyse the formal features these neo-historical/postmodernist works present such as intertextuality, interdiscursivity and creative anachronism in more detail. With the rise of this typology of works, further research could shed light on all the different themes and formal aspects not only *Dickinson* and *The Great* present, but also other neo-historical/postmodernist productions, and the different ways they comment on the present through the prism of the past.

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