

Subject: Sabina Murray and "The Sisters"?

Date: Thursday, November 7, 2013 11:39:51 AM Mountain Standard Time

From: Roger Macfarlane

To: madelinem18@hotmail.com

Dear Madeline,

I read "The Sisters" this morning. Want to talk about (or correspond via email) about it?

I think it's an amusing — though, of course, disturbing — story, well written and fascinating at least for the fact that it's the work of a female author using the voice of a really old man. The prurient interest manifest by this old man throughout a lifetime of dabbling interest in Emily Dickinson is rather amusing to me. While I know next to nothing about "the cult of Emily Dickinson" (Murray, p. 29), I think that the author here has delivered a "somewhat humorous recasting" or updated transferral of maenadic mystery into modern American culture.

I think there is certainly something worth exploring in this story. It's worth a paper... and it can generate a good one, I think.

If I were digging further into this usage of classical mythology — OGCMA0271NOTBacchanalia_Murray, by the way — I would explore Murray's impulse to invent that Dickinsonian poem that she invents for Bakley's fourth letter to Zinn on p. 19-20. You may choose another place to start. But I think that's sort of the heart of the story. It seems to have the most secret treasure that a scholar like Zinn could want, an unpublished poem by Emily Dickinson herself.

Are there scholars who speculate that Emily Dickinson was associated with cultivation of classical Dionysiac cult? Probably not. But I think one might likely find some sort of documentation of co-eds at New England liberal arts schools (and perhaps even in Amherst, whence the Belle of Amhers came) who engage in secretive witch-like activities even today. The granddaughter of Margaret Dickinson Shumworth seems an amusing caricature of that sort of college student. Murray puts a suggestive name on her — Emma Dickinson Slutsky — and makes her especially brash in her two appearances in the story. I got a kick out of that.

Maybe go to the 5th floor reference desk and ask about how to learn about Emily Dickinson's reception among American college girls today. My hunch is that you'll find some documentation for real-life people acting like the people Murray has Professor Zinn encounter in the story.

Hey. I don't want to write this paper. I want you to! I just got thinking about it, and decided to spill some thoughts.

Have you read Euripides' *Bacchae*? The longish clip in ML is enough to introduce you to the old-man Cadmus and his inquisitive admission of the Dionysiac cult in Thebes. The brutal death of Pentheus is maybe enough to give you some parallels for Murray's clever usage in Bakley's mysterious (oooh: double-loaded word, that) death.

Have fun...

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