WENDY MARTIN

Introduction

Born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson led a privileged life with a financially comfortable and well-respected family in a deeply Calvinist New England community. Her father was elected a representative to Congress and served as Treasurer of Amherst College for thirty-seven years, a post later occupied by Dickinson's brother, Austin. The Dickinson family hosted many important visitors, including the famed essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emily Dickinson had numerous correspondents and attended both Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. For most of her life, however, the poet spent much of her time secluded within her family's home, writing poetry and helping to run the household. She sent numerous letters and poems to her intimate friend and sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, and she, with her sister, Lavinia, nursed her ailing mother throughout her lengthy illness and until her death, just four years before the poet's own. Dickinson's poetry expresses her struggles with her faith, with her father, with mortality, and with the challenges of being a woman and a poet.

Emily Dickinson has emerged as a powerful and persistent figure in American culture. As a woman poet, Dickinson has been portrayed as singular and enigmatic and even eccentric. Often, Dickinson is painted as a young woman in white, closeted in the upper rooms of her home, isolated not only from her neighbors and friends, but also from the historical and cultural events taking place outside her door. Her poems speak most noticeably of "the Heaven of God," "the starkest Madness," or the "Infinite" rather than of worldly events. She has been perceived as agoraphobic, deeply afraid of her surroundings, and as an eccentric spinster. At the same time, Dickinson is widely acknowledged as one of the founders of American poetry, an innovative pre-modernist poet as well as a rebellious and courageous woman.

Since her poems were first published posthumously in 1890, critical responses to Emily Dickinson's work have been both abundant and unceasing, steadily gathering force with every new version of her collected poems and

each poem newly discovered in her letters and manuscripts. Continuous publication of Dickinson's poems and manuscripts has been spurred by vigorous scholarly inquiry and by public interest in her poetry and her life. Emily Dickinson's vast appeal lies not only in her writings but also in her literary persona, one that has become extraordinarily resonant in the popular imagination. An exhibition at the Mead Art Museum in Amherst, 1997, demonstrates the poet's palpable presence in today's culture in images of the white dress she famously wore, in various versions of the solitary woman and her "letter to the world," and in the incorporation of words from her poems in contemporary art. One of the most persistent images of the poet in both public perception and literary scholarship has been that of Dickinson as a private woman who remained isolated within her New England home, and who included her poems in private letters rather than public books and journals. Dickinson's position in both the public and private sphere, however, is being re-evaluated by critics today, revealing her to be both more fully connected to her cultural surroundings and more strategic in her withdrawals: "The Soul selects her own Society – / Then – shuts the Door –" (J 303).

One of the most often quoted facts of Emily Dickinson's life is that she published only a few poems during her lifetime. Although she wrote to the writer and editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, to ask his opinion of her poetry, she did not openly seek publication, and most of the poems published during her lifetime were submitted by Dickinson's friends, not by the poet herself. In 1858, she began to record poems in folded pages hand-bound with string, often called fascicles. In this way, she collected and organized, and some say self-published, her poetry. Although Dickinson asked her sister, Lavinia, to destroy the poems upon her death, Lavinia sought instead to organize, or reorganize, them for publication, igniting a tumultuous battle for control over Dickinson's poems and their appearance in print. The publication history that followed her death has been marked by considerable controversy, resulting most recently in the increasing use and availability of Dickinson's poems in their original manuscript form.

This movement toward the examination of Dickinson's original manuscripts has lead to a more detailed exploration of the peculiarly visual aspects of Dickinson's poetry – her dashes of varying lengths, unusual capitalization, the placement of poems on the page, and her insertion of variant word choices in many poems. Her unusual poetic form was both lauded and denounced by early critics, and often "cleaned up" by editors, but its fragmented, multiple, and imagistic qualities have more recently been compared to modernist poetic strategies. An examination of the letters in which Dickinson included many of her poems even calls into question the boundaries that divide poetic

and epistolary genres, leading readers to fascinating questions about the perimeters and possibilities of poetry.

Dickinson's stark style, her ambiguous punctuation and capitalization, her variant word choices and multiple versions of poems, and her practice of expunging clearly historical references from her poetry, all contribute to creating poems that are extraordinarily open to varying, sometimes even contradictory, interpretations that perplex, startle, and amaze readers. At times, her poems seem to embody multiple voices that perform various personae. Many of the contributors to this volume suggest that such contradiction lies at the very center of Dickinson's poems and her conception of herself as poet. Although we can identify many cohesive trends and persistent topics in Dickinson studies, Dickinson scholarship can be characterized by similar dialogue and movement, by its fervently debated interpretations and its groundbreaking and startling new readings, all of which demonstrate the brilliant possibilities of Dickinson's poetry and the importance of her work and her life in American culture.

This companion begins with Dickinson's manuscripts and her biography. Focusing in part on the editorial battle that began between Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, and her husband's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, Betsy Erkkila's essay, "The Emily Dickinson wars," provides a thorough and nuanced overview of the publication history of Dickinson's poems. Erkkila argues that controversy over what we read when we read a Dickinson poem constitutes a "scene of struggle in which significant social and cultural values have been both produced and contested." In particular, Erkkila asserts that debate about Dickinson's poetry has continued to circulate around questions of authorial intention, the individual author, and traditional aesthetic categories "despite the efforts of feminists, new historicists, multiculturalists, and cultural studies critics to move the study of literature toward a more historically contingent, interdisciplinary, and worldly focus." Scholarly outrage over editorial changes to Dickinson's poems, including altered punctuation, capitalization and line breaks, choices of variant words, and the alteration and removal of poems from Dickinson's letters, has led to increased focus on Dickinson's original manuscripts. This movement, which attempts to maintain intentionality in Dickinson's work and respect for Dickinson as a "great poet," further isolates the poet from her social world and her poems from their cultural contexts. Erkkila seeks a transformation in Dickinson studies that will accompany our move into the twenty-first century: "Whereas in the past, contests over Dickinson have tended to focus on her poetic genius, her intentions, her singularity, and the private and essentially gendered dimensions of her art, in the new millennium one can imagine enlarged definitions of 'context' and other possible 'wars' – social

as well as literary, cultural as well as individual, international as well as national and familial – that might enrich our understanding of the historical locations and occasions for writing through renewed acts of critical attention to Emily Dickinson and the world she lived in."

In "Emily Dickinson and the American South," Christopher Benfey turns to the critical reception of Dickinson's work; like Erkkila, he emphasizes the cultural and ideological forces that shape readings of Dickinson's poetry. Benfey argues that many early critics of Dickinson's poems perceived Dickinson as avant-garde, a modern rebel rejecting all social norms. Nevertheless, a significant group of critics, Benfey suggests, viewed Dickinson as a conservative New England traditionalist. Southern agrarianists like Allen Tate adopted Dickinson as an "honorary southerner" and believed that Dickinson's seclusion constituted a rejection of the increasing industrialism and urbanism of her age. These critics, Benfey posits, have had a significant impact on Dickinson literary criticism of recent decades, including feminist criticism. Feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar drew heavily on Tate's writings and similarly argued that Dickinson's seclusion constituted a rejection of her society, but with a difference. Feminists argued that Dickinson voluntarily shut out society as a rejection of its patriarchal values. These seemingly different critical traditions are joined, Benfey argues, in their similar assumption that Dickinson's "poems are best read in their relation to some version of 'Old New England,' defined as patriarchal, religious, marked by quiet habits and intense piety." In the end, Benfey asserts the need for a recognition of rebellion that "goes beyond American national boundaries."

Martha Nell Smith's "Susan and Emily Dickinson: their lives, in letters" focuses on the relationship between Emily Dickinson and her close friend and sister-in-law Susan Dickinson. Perhaps above all, their relationship was an epistolary one; Emily wrote nearly 500 letters and sent numerous poems to Susan. In response, Susan offered insights, observations and suggestions. Contrary to the narrative of the isolated poetess, this correspondence reveals the poet's connection and interaction with her sister-in-law on intensely personal and deeply artistic levels. It also places Dickinson squarely in the manuscript culture of the nineteenth century, one in which binding poems into fascicles and enclosing poems in letters was not at all unusual. Indeed, the letters between the two women intermingle reflections on daily life and poetry. Smith suggests that the "facts of this correspondence challenge not only widely held notions about the individual author Emily Dickinson, but also literary traditions that have drawn sharp distinctions between 'poetic' and 'domestic' subjects." Relating evidence of Susan's immense contribution to Emily Dickinson's poetic practices and strategies, Smith describes

Susan's place at the center of the editorial battles that began after Emily Dickinson's death and continue today. According to Smith, "the editing of Emily Dickinson was, from the very beginning, driven, inflected by, and/or entangled with biography."

The next group of essays in this companion looks more closely at Dickinson's poems, her themes, and her strategies. Wendy Barker begins this discussion in "Emily Dickinson and poetic strategy" by examining Dickinson's own references to prose and poetry in her poems and letters. Throughout Dickinson's poetry, the term prose is associated with oppressive sunlight, sermons, religious practices, patriarchy, and constraint. Poetry, on the other hand, is allied with liberating darkness and inner freedom. Dickinson used her poetry as a force of liberation that allowed her to move outside of the prose boundaries constructed by her father, the church, and her culture, all of which hemmed her into a confined space. For Dickinson, Barker argues, "To be . . . wide open to the moment, oblivious to prosaic social demands and stultifying theological ones, is poetry, possibility, and perhaps even paradise."

For Fred White, in "Emily Dickinson's existential dramas," Dickinson's poetry dwells less in paradise than in the limited nature of humanity. White demonstrates Dickinson's dramatic portrayal of existentialism. He argues that "Instead of directly conveying the poet's own thoughts and feelings about the subject, Dickinson prefers the aesthetically richer indirection of a dramatic rendering, whereby characters – personae – speak in their own disparate voices, thereby creating a richer and more complex work of art." The voices of her characters demonstrate major existential themes, "choos[ing] existence over essence" and "champion[ing] the existential over the transcendent." In many ways, White asserts, Dickinson's poetry is written against Emersonian transcendentalism, showing that "word and world – mind and nature – are separated by an unbridgeable gulf." We see in Dickinson's poetry that "*existence* is bound by temporality, individual limitation and isolation," yet these very barriers to transcendence make her "most of all a poet of the deliberately lived moment, of physical presence, of life's unstoppable movement."

Cristanne Miller and Suzanne Juhasz's "Performances of gender in Dickinson's poetry" similarly attends to the dramatic voices of Dickinson's poetry, viewing the "space of the poem . . . as a stage, whereon the poet may play a multitude of self-positionings." In this essay, Dickinson's performativity allows her to take on various subject positions and to enact gender. For Miller and Juhasz, the performance unfolds not just in the voice of Emily Dickinson but in the dramatic interplay between reader and text. They argue that "the poem demands of readers that they perform its 'script' along with

the poem's speaker or 'voice.'" In Dickinson's lyric poetry, the speaker's self, and its gendered identity, is "a self that is done – enacted, performed by the reader." Thus, despite the traditional view of Dickinson as isolated from the world, her "poems are particularly open to – indeed, demanding of – readerly participation."

Shira Wolosky's "Emily Dickinson: being in the body," begins with the poem, "I am afraid to own a body," taking up the question of embodiment in relation to identity. Dickinson's emphasis on body and soul seems radically different from Whitman's inclusive and expansive "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul," but, Wolosky argues, both poets respond to American cultural forces that promise correlation, "implicit claims that the various levels of experience and of identity are mutually confirming and culturally coherent." For Whitman, this correlation is approximated but with some tension, but for Dickinson, just as various levels of meaning seem to be reaching correlation, they are stymied and the reader experiences a shift in meaning and a contest of contradictory ideas. Dickinson's greater agonistic tendencies, Wolosky argues, have in large part to do with her often contradictory positions as woman, poet, and American. "These analogical slips," Wolosky states, "textually enact a kind of cultural slippage in which a female gender complicates or contradicts assertions of American or Romantic selfhood; material progress in the world subverts or opposes, rather than realizes spiritual longings; self-fulfillment contests self-denial; and body remains in tension with soul, including poetic embodiment as against some pure artistic essence." Such representational collisions are more than the poet's personal contests; they reflect broad cultural controversy.

In "Emily Dickinson and the Gothic in Fascicle 16," Daneen Wardrop examines Dickinson's use of Gothic images to explore identity in the particular context of her self-bound fascicles. She looks specifically at the way in which the visual elements of the manuscripts, dashes, line- and page-breaks, and handwriting, as well as the arrangement of the poems, influence the Gothic elements of the eleven poems included in Fascicle 16. Wardrop presents Dickinson as a forerunner of modernist and postmodernist ideas of identity, demonstrating in her poetry the "splitting, conflicted, shattering subject" so present throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary works. Like Wolosky, Wardrop finds interdependence, contradiction, and collision at the center of Dickinson's poems. Using strategies of disorientation to heighten suspense and to unsettle the reader, Dickinson conveys identities that are unstable, "always in process," that move between singular and plural and male and female subject positions in disconcerting, shifting pronouns. Words crossed out or written above lines, blank pages, and multiple versions of the poems all contribute to the multiplicity of meaning in Dickinson's poems; the

fascicle manuscripts reveal the poems as "elastic, in process, a workshopping entity, alive."

The final three essays in this companion pay particular attention to the cultural contexts of Dickinson's poems. In "Emily Dickinson and popular culture" David Reynolds again departs from Dickinson scholarship's traditional emphasis on the poet's isolation and discusses the many ways in which Dickinson's poetry engages with and was influenced by the popular culture of nineteenth-century America. "[H]aunted themes," some very similar to those Wardrop discusses, appear here as evidence of Dickinson's tremendous interest in the popular newspapers and pamphlets of her day, which increasingly reported the sometimes gruesome details of crimes and mysteries. In addition, Dickinson's poems register the mid-nineteenth-century's controversy over sermon styles, reflecting an interest in "imaginative preaching," which emphasized anecdote and adventure over doctrinal formality. She also takes up the topic of temperance, manipulating and playing off of popular images of this movement. Her successful poetic use of such popular images occurs, according to Reynolds, through "radically personalizing [them] by redirecting [them] toward quotidian experience and private emotion," and through "direct[ing] such images inward, using them as metaphors for the recesses of the psyche." Reynolds's essay concludes with a discussion of the influence of the expansion of women's literature between 1858 and 1866, Dickinson's most productive years. Reynolds argues that this literature, sometimes referred to as the "literature of misery" because it focused on the inner grief and anger of women, had a great influence on Dickinson's own imagery, particularly her "repeated use of volcano imagery." Dickinson's poetry stands out, Reynolds argues, "for its playful fusion of opposing views."

Other scholars, however, like Domhnall Mitchell, choose to emphasize Dickinson's seeming disregard of egalitarianism. In "Emily Dickinson and class," Mitchell argues that Dickinson's comments on class and race situate "her in an American tradition of thought and writing that responds with alarm to the dangers perceived as latent in a democratic system." Mitchell analyzes several of Dickinson's most well-known poems in light of their class implications, arguing that they demonstrate a regard for observation over action and reveal Dickinson's paradoxical positions of exclusivity and exclusion. Mitchell explains that "Dickinson's position as a female member of the provincial gentry in Amherst almost certainly contributed to the formation of a consciousness that felt special and even superior, but also excluded from the public spheres of action and power. The result is the frequent promotion in her writing of non-involvement, strategic withdrawal, deferral, anonymity, and witness."

Whereas Reynolds and Mitchell tend in the end to distinguish Dickinson and her poetry from the lives and literature of other nineteenth-century women writers, Paula Bennett seeks to reintegrate Dickinson with her female peers. Bennett asserts that discussions of other nineteenth-century women poets have been pursued in Dickinson studies mainly as a way to elevate Dickinson above other writers, to demonstrate "Dickinson's genius and her ability to transcend the limits of her time, place, and gender." Bennett's essay, "Emily Dickinson and her American women poet peers," argues against this exceptionality. Dickinson struggles, Bennett suggests, with two competing positions: an immersion in domestic life and a quest for literary immortality. The complications of this contest are most evident in Dickinson's image of the spider, a figure that combines the images of sewing and weaving so common in women's writing with a masculine representation of a solitary spider "spinning delicate webs out of a secret self, a self known, finally, only to God." Bennett looks closely at two of Dickinson's spider poems, "The Spider holds a Silver Ball" and "A Spider sewed at Night," in the context of other nineteenth-century women's poetry about weaving in order to demonstrate Dickinson's struggle to mediate issues of transcendence and materiality.

Dickinson prevails as a powerful poetic voice and literary figure. Part of her genius lies in the fact that she was deeply a part of her own culture; at the same time, she anticipated the psychological preoccupations and poetic themes and practices that we grapple with today and will continue to engage throughout the twenty-first century.

BIOGRAPHY AND PUBLICATION HISTORY

I

BETSY ERKKILA

The Emily Dickinson wars

We see – Comparatively –
The Thing so towering high
– Emily Dickinson

"There was a 'war between the houses,'" wrote Mary Lee Hall of the disputes between Lavinia Dickinson (Emily Dickinson's sister), Susan Gilbert Dickinson (Dickinson's intimate friend and the wife of her brother, Austin Dickinson), and Mabel Loomis Todd (Austin's lover for thirteen years) over the first volumes of Emily Dickinson's *Poems* and *Letters* edited and published by Todd and Thomas Higginson in the 1890s.[1] This early and primarily female "war," which "had as its site and center the volcanic and transgressive love relationship between Dickinson and Sue,"[2] has continued into the present with disputes between male editors such as R. W. Franklin and feminist critics such as Susan Howe over the proper editing of Dickinson; the 1993 publication of *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by William H. Shurr, proposes to add 498 "new" poems to the Dickinson canon; and the 1998 publication of Franklin's long-awaited and already much-debated variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* adds seventeen poems to the Dickinson canon and promises to replace the standard edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson in 1955. As Christopher Benfey observes, "For a century now . . . the editing of Emily Dickinson's poetry has been entangled with human passions, sex, and blindered partiality, as though the editors were (and sometimes they were) . . . despairing lovers tossing on their beds."[3] This is the stuff of American soap opera. And yet these ongoing Dickinson wars have produced a heady mix of sex and text that has left its mark not only on past and recent editions of Dickinson's work but also on the making of American literary history.

My own interests in entering the Dickinson "wars" are more social and cultural than editorial. Rather than tracing the editorial history of Dickinson's work as stages in an ongoing telos of bringing Dickinson into proper