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EMILY DICKINSON IN CONTEXT

Long believed to be untouched by contemporary events, ideas, and environments, Emily Dickinson's writings have been the subject of intense historical research in recent years. This volume of thirty-three essays by leading scholars offers a comprehensive introduction to the contexts most important for the study of Dickinson's writings. While providing an overview of their topic, the essays also present groundbreaking research and original arguments, treating the poet's local environments; literary influences; social, cultural, political, and intellectual contexts; and reception. A resource for scholars and students of American literature and poetry in English, the collection is an indispensable contribution to the study not only of Dickinson's writings but also of the contexts for poetic production and circulation more generally in the nineteenth-century United States.

ELIZA RICHARDS is an associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Author of *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (Cambridge, 2004), she has published essays on American literature and culture in journals such as *Arizona Quarterly*, *ESQ*, *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, *Poe Studies*, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, and *Victorian Poetry*.

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Abbreviations and Textual Note

- Capps Capps, Jack, *Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836–1886* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).
- EDJ *The Emily Dickinson Journal* (Johns Hopkins University Press).
- F Franklin, R.W., ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).
- Habegger Habegger, Alfred, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001).
- Handbook Grabher, Gudrun, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds., *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).
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Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Dickinson's poems follow the text of Franklin's variorum edition; both Franklin and Johnson numbers are cited parenthetically within the text for the convenience of readers. When the particular version of a poem is important to the essay's argument, the letter has been added in addition to the number. Dickinson's letters are cited by Johnson's letter numbers. Dickinson's idiosyncratic spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been retained throughout, and her dashes are represented by spaced hyphens, as in Franklin's edition. Some contributors have chosen to represent line breaks as they appear in Dickinson's manuscripts, though neither Johnson nor Franklin editions represent them in this way.

Chronology

- 1828 Dickinson's parents, attorney Edward Dickinson of Amherst and Emily Norcross of Monson, marry.
- 1829 (William) Austin, Dickinson's brother, is born in Amherst.
- 1830 Edward buys one half of the brick Homestead on Main Street that belongs to his father. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson is born here on December 10.
- 1833 Lavinia Norcross (Vinnie), Dickinson's sister, is born.
- 1835 Dickinson begins four years at Amherst Female Seminary. Edward Dickinson is appointed treasurer of Amherst College.
- 1838 Edward Dickinson begins first term in the Massachusetts legislature. Samuel Fowler Dickinson, his father and a founder of Amherst College, dies in Ohio.
- 1840 Dickinson enters Amherst Academy, with Lavinia: "I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they?" (L6). The Dickinsons move to West Street (now North Pleasant Street).
- 1846–7 The only known daguerreotype of Dickinson was made by William C. North in Amherst.
- 1847 Dickinson graduates from Amherst Academy and enters Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where she completes a single year of studies: "I am now studying 'Silliman's Chemistry' & Cutler's Physiology, in both of which I am much interested" (L20). There she refuses to confess faith publicly during a period of evangelical Protestant religious revivalism.
- 1850 The Amherst College *Indicator* publishes a valentine by Dickinson, "Magnum bonum." Dickinson continues to resist religious conversion, even though many of her loved ones convert: "I am standing alone in rebellion" (L35). During

- Dickinson's lifetime a handful of poems were published, always anonymously, and some perhaps without her permission.
- 1852 The *Springfield Republican* publishes Dickinson's "Sic transit gloria mundi" (F2 J3) as "A Valentine." Edward Dickinson is elected to the US House of Representatives. Emily writes to Susan Gilbert: "Why cant *I* be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?" (L94).
- 1853 Austin enters Harvard Law School.
- 1855 With Lavinia, Dickinson travels to Washington, DC, and spends several weeks there in February and March. On the way home they visit Philadelphia, where Dickinson meets the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. In November, the Dickinsons move back to the Homestead on Main Street. Emily and Lavinia never marry; they live their adult lives with their parents in this house.
- 1856 Austin marries Susan Huntington Gilbert. They move into a house built for them next door to the Dickinson Homestead, which they call The Evergreens, where they raise a family and have an active social life. The relationship between Dickinson and Susan is important: "Dear Sue - With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than anyone living - To say that sincerely is strange praise" (L757).
- 1857 Ralph Waldo Emerson lectures in Amherst and is entertained at The Evergreens: "It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!" (Prose Fragment 10, in *Letters*).
- 1858 Dickinson begins recording poems in hand-sewn booklets later known as fascicles. The practice continues until 1864. After this, she gathers some poems in loose anthologies called sets (in 1865, and from 1871 until 1875, when she stops). "Nobody knows this little Rose" (F11 J35) appears in the *Springfield Republican* as "To Mrs. - - , with a Rose. [Surreptitiously communicated to The Republican]." Circa 1858–1865: Dickinson's poetic production increases dramatically, reaching an estimated peak of 295 in 1863, and more than 200 in 1862 and 1865. She becomes increasingly reclusive, but maintains an extensive and engaged correspondence with family and friends, many of whom are also prominent public figures (Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Bowles, Josiah Gilbert Holland, Helen Hunt Jackson, Judge Otis P. Lord). The "Master Letters," drafts of love letters with an unknown recipient, are probably composed during this time (it is unknown if the letters were sent).

Chronology

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- 1861 US Civil War begins. "I taste a liquor never brewed - " (F207 J214) is published in the *Republican* under the title "The May-Wine." Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies: "Silver - perished - with her Tongue - " (F600 J312).
- 1862 "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers - " (F124 J216) is published in the *Republican* as "The Sleeping." Dickinson begins correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, responding to his essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* that offers advice to young writers: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260). Higginson departs for South Carolina as the Colonel of the first black Union army regiment. Amherst native Frazar Stearns is killed in action, "his big heart shot away by a 'minie ball'" (L255).
- 1864 Dickinson suffers from eye problems and moves to Cambridge, MA, for treatment, April–November: "yet I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself - " (L290). Austin is drafted to fight in the Civil War and pays for a substitute. "Flowers - Well - if anybody" (F95 J137) published by *Drum Beat*, *Springfield Republican*, and *Boston Post* under the title "Flowers"; "These are the days when Birds come back - " (F122 J130) published by *Drum Beat*, a Brooklyn paper raising funds for the Union cause, under the title "October." "Some keep the Sabbath Going to Church - " (F236 J324) published in the *Round Table* under the title "My Sabbath." "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" (F321 J228) published by *Drum Beat* and the *Springfield Republican* under the title "Sunset." "Success is counted sweetest" (F112 J67) published in the *Brooklyn Daily Union*.
- 1865 Dickinson returns to Cambridge for eye treatment in April, and stays another seven months. Vision improves.
- 1866 "A narrow fellow in the grass" (F1096 J986) is published by the *Republican* as "The Snake"; Dickinson tells Higginson: "it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation" (L316).
- 1869 Dickinson refuses Higginson's invitation to come to Boston: "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (L330).
- 1870 Higginson visits Dickinson in Amherst.
- 1871–2 George Eliot's *Middlemarch* published: "'What do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory - " (L389).

- 1873 Higginson visits Dickinson again.
- 1874 Edward Dickinson dies in Boston: "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists" (L418).
- 1875 Emily Norcross Dickinson has a stroke and is paralyzed.
- 1876 In a letter, well-known writer Helen Hunt Jackson rebukes Dickinson for refusing to publish: "You are a great poet – and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud" (L444a).
- 1877 Samuel Bowles visits Dickinson in Amherst: "You have the most triumphant Face out of Paradise" (L489).
- 1878 Helen Hunt Jackson visits Dickinson in Amherst. At her insistence, Dickinson allows "Success is counted sweetest" to be published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets*. It is attributed to Emerson. Around this time Dickinson begins writing to Judge Otis P. Lord, a relationship that lasts to his death: "It is strange that I miss you at night so much when I was never with you" (L645). Most letters, like this one, survive only in draft form, or as fair copies. It is unknown if they were sent.
- 1880 Reverend Charles Wadsworth visits Dickinson in Amherst. Judge Lord and nieces visit Amherst. Lord gives Dickinson *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* at Christmastime: "While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm" (L368).
- 1882 Dickinson's mother dies after a long illness: "The dear Mother that could not walk, has *flown*" (L779). Reverend Wadsworth dies. Judge Lord visits Dickinson in Amherst.
- 1883 Dickinson's beloved nephew Thomas Gilbert (Gib) dies at age eight; she writes to Susan, "I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies" (L868).
- 1884 Judge Lord dies: "I work to drive the awe away, yet awe impels the work" (L891).
- 1886 Dickinson dies on May 15; her final letter to Louise and Frances Norcross reads simply: "Little Cousins, Called back. Emily" (L1046). Funeral takes place on May 19 in the Homestead library. Higginson attends and reads Emily Brontë's "No coward soul is mine." Susan Dickinson writes an obituary that appears in the *Republican*. Soon afterward Lavinia discovers a trove of Dickinson manuscripts in a wooden trunk – no one seems to have been aware during her lifetime of how many poems she was writing (more than 1,700 are extant, many in multiple versions) – and decides to enlist help in publishing them.