

Eleanor Heginbotham, Ph.D.
OLLI-AU Spring 2024; Class #677
Nine Tuesdays: 11:45-1:15 (online except #9)

Emily Dickinson: “Unto [Her] Books So Good to Turn”

*Mr Higginson,
Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?
The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask –
Should you think it breathed – and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude –
If I make the mistake – that you dared to tell me – would give me sincerer honor – toward you –
I enclose my name – asking you, if you please – Sir – to tell me what is true?
That you will not betray me – it is needless to ask – since Honor is it's own pawn –*

When Emily wrote to the famous Civil War leader of black troops, one-time clergyman, and current editor of *The Atlantic*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson in April 1862, she presented herself as a neophyte, unsure of meeting his editorial challenge to poets, especially women poets, to make their poems *live*. However, she had already written over 300 poems, many of which declare (slant-wise) that she had a sense of her own worth and mission:

I've nothing else – to bring,
You know –
So I keep bringing These –
Just as the Night keeps
Fetching stars
To our familiar Eyes – (Fr253)

She had been conscious, too, from her earliest experiments, that “These” – the poems that caused her earliest biographer to call her a “genius,” could affect the future as their words and images roiled around in all our brains: By chivalries as tiny,
A Blossom or a Book,
The seeds of smiles are planted –
Which blossom in the dark. (Fr37)

As she did to Higginson in the letter that many see as her audition for recognition, she had been sending the tiny chivalries to friends, self-publishing them in that sense, but she had also – much more quietly-- begun another form of publication: bookmaking. Her first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, called these little books – they might now be what we call “chapbooks” – “fascicles,” and it is the *what?* of them – and the wonder in reading her work in the context of her own editing that will be our focus for the next nine sessions. By the time she wrote Higginson, she had already made at least twelve of the little books we now call “fascicles.”

Attempting to understand fully almost any single Dickinson poem is already a challenge, but one we will take on, knowing that each offers multiple possibilities of interpretation. They happen to us; we experience something we recognize but didn't know we knew, but they are also, sometimes, narratives, sometimes lyrical eruptions by a “supposed” person, sometimes witty plays with words or commonplace expressions, sometimes detailed and keen and accurate (sometimes hilarious) observations of nature, sometimes powerful elegies – and more. Deconstructing a single poem requires both diligence (often checking dictionaries or histories) and imagination (into the many angles of a metaphor). We will take on the challenge, but it is a challenge that is all the more interesting when we read the single lyrics in the setting – the only one outside of those she included in letters – that she herself arranged, the “fascicles.”

On folded, stacked papers, sewn in heavy twine, Dickinson copied – the ink wet on the thin sheets -- between 11 and 29 poems. She apparently began the practice in 1858 at the age of 28; she answered Higginson's challenge in 1862, and, as far as we know, she finished the 40th little book in 1864, two years later.

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Class Process (my hope) and Your Preparations:

Unlike classes you may have shared with me through the years (on Fitzgerald, Faulkner, James, Wharton), which required a great deal of reading between sessions, this one may be a relief to you: the only requirement is that you read the poems for the next week's discussion.* I will also offer pages from my own book (this is the first year I have granted myself the pleasure of sharing it with OLLI friends) and two essays from others; doing so may elicit different layers of discussion as you may disagree with parts or all of my thesis and my suggested interpretations. Dickinson's organization of her poems provides a framework for our selection and organization. As it is not possible to read and discuss almost 2,000 poems, Dickinson's own groupings, which provide limitations and new possibilities. My past classes on Dickinson have been driven by themes: death, war, summer delights and so forth, chosen by me. These were chosen by Emily.

Only during the first session will I offer a power point lecture (I hear your sighs of relief) for those who would like a little more than the basic information on Dickinson's life and scholarship about her. Thereafter, with some exceptions, class time will be entirely reading together (yes, again: one cannot read a poem too many times) and discussing them, one fascicle at a time. Of the 40, we will tackle nine, * and obviously, we will never *complete* the proposed selection, but (again, I hope) we will have burrowed into the multiple possibilities of those poems for which we had time. Most sessions, however, may also include one of the spinoffs of Dickinson studies or popular culture – just samples because they are informative and fun.

I may also suggest readings from the extra material (in fact, I'll offer three), and I encourage you to dig up books you read in college or new books on Dickinson as you have the time and inclination to do. Her scholars often show her effect: many are brilliant and eloquent.

Our ninth session is a special treat – at least for me: a marathon. Every year one is organized by the Dickinson Museum, on line and continuing for parts of several days. With the Poetry Office at the Library of Congress and Folger, I organized a whole day in the beautiful upper room at the L of C, to which some folks came from the Middle West and Boston. We covered all but the first 200 poems from 8-5 that year. We had fabulous marathons in Saint Paul, going on into the night, and others have organized them elsewhere in the world. We could probably arrange a hybrid session if that is the will of the class. Of course, ours will be a short marathon, but I hope it will have some of the rewards of these. Anyone who loves poetry finds these cold readings, one after another, uttered in various voices, revelatory. Closer to the day we will decide whether to make the meeting in person, hybrid, or another zoom. I prefer the first.

The Book Situation:

This is very important for the ease of discussion. The editing history of Dickinson is, perhaps only excepting Blake's, the most complex in the English language. You may have multiple editions of her poems, but it will be chaos if you try to follow the class discussion with anything other than *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by **R.W. Franklin** (Reader's one-volume edition), widely available on line – not the three-volume scholar edition; it runs about \$30, but I'm sure you can find cheaper used copies. Before Franklin's editing in the '90's we relied on the superb edition of Thomas Johnson, which may be the one you own from earlier experiences with the poet. Again, it will just confuse things if you use it rather than the Franklin edition. Franklin also edited the *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, which became one of the foundations for his edition of the complete poems. I will share pages as needed.

** The fascicle lists are in the "Day 1 Encyclopedia" entry on the URL listed at the end of this syllabus

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My book, published in 2003, *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson* (let's call it *RFED* for short) is not so easy, though it does exist on Amazon from time to time. Its **original** price was ridiculous, which was one reason I never used it in a class. Ohio State brought it out in much more reasonable paperback form, but when the first run finished, it became the kind of book they print on demand with a three-week delay. Not knowing how many would be in the class and, of those, how many would want to buy it, OLLI folks and I decided not to place an order. Instead, with lots of help, it has been scanned and is available on a URL document. **IF** you want to buy it and can find it on line, I'm delighted, but it is certainly NOT necessary. Also scanned and available on the URL link are three essays not in *RFED*. All are outlined in the syllabus.

*Special note: The scanned sections appear in reverse order on the link (don't ask). Toward the bottom you will find a long document full of numbers, copied from the *Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. The first pages are needed for Day 2; the others may be handy for you later; you may want to save it where you can access it rather than printing the whole thing. If you print the daily portions, you will want to save ink by leaving out the title page. Again, these readings are optional.*

Referencing the Poems:

Because Dickinson did not title her poems, they are generally referenced by first lines and numbers (depending on the date of the criticism, either Johnson's or Franklin's). For this class "F" stands for "fascicle number; "Fr" stands for Franklin's poem number.

Schedule – offered with "the thing with feathers. . ."

Week 1 March 5 : Only two poems: "They shut me up in Prose" Fr445 and "This was a Poet" Fr446. Also, if possible, read *RFED* Introduction; and Chapter 5 (103-116). *Copies of these, marked "Day 1 "Acknowledgements" and "Day 1 "Whatever it is" are on the email attachment sent in the mail with this syllabus. If you choose to read these, feel free to skip the portions on other scholars (xi-xii for example). You may want to read these after rather than before the class session.*

Introduction to Dickinson and to the question of her "fascicles." An outline of significant dates that will fly by in the power point is included at the end of this syllabus document.

Week 2 March 12: All the poems of **F1** and, if possible, *RFED* Chapter 6 (120-125) *This is marked on the URL as "Day 2 Reading the Fascicles," and on this one day there is possible confusion. The first two pages of the scan list F3 and F40 (something covered further in the book and NOT covered today; the actual lists for F1 (the subject of the pages listed) and 14 were omitted in the scanning, but the lists are in the "Encyclopedia" list for sent for Day 1. Much more fun: read "Sumptuous Destitution Day 2," available on the link. This essay by the great poet Richard Wilbur is an overview of Dickinson's spiritual and aesthetic paradoxes. In class, we will carry over the discussion from Week 1 and read the simply lovely poems of Fascicle 1 aloud.*

Emily Dickinson never lets us forget for very long that in some respects life gave her short measure; and indeed, it is possible to see the greater part of her poetry as an effort to cope with her sense of privation. I think that for her here were three major privations; she was deprived of an orthodox and steady religious faith; she was deprived of love; she was deprived of literary recognition. Richard Wilbur

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- Week 3 March 19: All the poems of **F14** and, if possible, RFED Chapter 6 (125-132). *The (optional) reading on the URL marked "Day 3 Asking Giving" is one of the more biographical in the book, dealing as it does with questions of fame and also with the possible effects of the Civil War on the poet. F14 contains a duplicate of a poem from F1, "The Feet of People Walking Home." Again, you will need to use the list for F14 in the Encyclopedia because of the regrettable lapse in scanning the page in RFED.*
- Week 4 March 26: All the poems of **F3** and, if possible, RFED Chapter 6 (132-142) *For those of you who are doing the (optional) reading from the URL, the entry labeled "Day 4 I Hide Myself" is dense reading – about a primary Dickinson subject, death. You will use this also for next week to see how one poem resonates differently in another context. More interesting than my chapter, however (although I stand by it) is a beautiful essay by Paula Bennett, "Looking at Death is Dying." This study of F16 is labeled "Day 4 Looking at Death on the URL list, and comes from the collection another colleague and I edited. Bennett situates this grouping with heartbreaking observations on the Civil War.*
- Week 5 April 2: We are half way through the semester, and, while we will spend time today talking about **F40** (see last week's readings from Chapter 6, we will also emerge from the subject of death (for two weeks) to return to the two poems with which the semester began to consider the paired poems in the context of **F21**. To do this *the (optional) reading is one short and one longer and denser chapter. Skim the short one that is labeled "Day 5 Dickinson's Aesthetics" but read if you have time and inclination the one marked for next week and labeled "Day 6 Owing the Gold"* For those who have RFED in book form, these are Chapter 1 and 2. Some of us have come through Easter.
- Week 6 April 9: We will talk more about the poems of **F21** but move on to the magic of **F8**, which contains a duplicate of one in **F21** ("At last to be identified!"). The (optional) reading for this week is Chapter 3 if you have RFED *or the file labeled "Day 7 Inferring from Duplicates."* Note that we are still off by a day in the labels.
- Week 7 April 15: While Spring comes on, we will continue with the subject of magic and consider more of the poems of **F8**. *The (optional) reading for this week is not from RFED; it is an offshoot, written from a footnote, and included in the Crumbley/Heginbotham collection. It is labeled "Day 7 Magical Transformations" and takes off from "Ah, Necromancy Sweet."* This would be an excellent week for your (optional) contributions of suggestions of poems NOT in the groupings we have studied, especially if the poems you select might well fit in to one of the groupings (fascicles 1,3,8,14,21,40).
- Week 8 April 23 (during Passover): All the poems of **Fascicles 6 and 10** and RPED Chapter 4 (70-102), a long (optional) assignment, but, I hope, a rewarding exploration of one of the most famous Dickinson poems, "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124) as it appears differently in two fascicles: **F6 and F10**. *You will find this in the (optional): reading found in the link labeled "Day 8 Alabaster Chambers"*
- Week 9 April 30: See page 2 of this syllabus for the Marathon treat – TBD where and how.

Dickinson the writer: How do we characterize her? She is epigrammatic, terse, abrupt, surprising, unsettling, flirtatious, savage, winsome, metaphysical, provocative, blasphemous, tragic, funny, and the list of adjectives could go on. Helen Vendler

A Timeline for Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

- 1813 Samuel Dickinson builds The Homestead
 1821 Amherst College Opens; Samuel Dickinson a principal builder and board member
 1828 Marriage of Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross
 1829 Birth of William Austin
 1830 December 10 – birth of EMILY ELIZABETH
 1833 Birth of Lavinia Norcross ; Homestead sold to Mack family
 1840 Emily enters Amherst Academy (for next seven years); family moves to Pleasant St.
 1844 Emily's relative and dear friend Sophia Holland dies of Typhus
 *1845 (Ackmann's P.M. #1) Letter to Abiah Root (one of many)
 1846 Friendship with Leonard Humphrey, principal of Amherst Ac., one "Master"
 1847 Emily enters Mount Holyoke
 *1848 (p.m.#2) Departure & note to Mary Lyon – returns home
 1850 Leonard Humphrey dies at 25
 1850 "Magnum bonum harem" by E.D. published in *Am. College Indicator* (Fr1)
 1852 "A Valentine" (Fr2) published in *Springfield Republican*
 1852 Edward Dickinson elected as Whig Party Rep. to Congress (10th District) (to 1855)
 *1852 (P.M. #3) Emily confesses / brags to brother her ambition
 1855 Dickinsons travel to Philadelphia (Emily meets Rev. Chas. Wadsworth) and to D C
 1855 Family buys back and returns to The Homestead
 1856 Marriage of William (Austin) Dickinson and Susan Gilbert; they build the Evergreens
 *1858 Emily begins to bind poems into "fascicles" (#4 P.M. letter to Norcross sisters)
 *1862 April 15, 1862 Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (#5 P.M.) "are you too . . ."
 *1863 Emily in Cambridge for eye treatments. (#7 P.M.) Isolation but also *Drum Beat* pub.
 1864 More *Drum Beat* donations in *Brooklyn Daily Union*
 1865 Civil War Ends; 1866 Carlo dies
 1869 Maggie Maher enters household to work (stays 30 years) *Maid as Muse* is good source
 *1870 Thomas Wentworth Higginson makes his exhausting visit (#8 P.M.)
 1872 Dickinson and Judge Otis Lord begin friendship (love lasts until his death in 1884)
 1874 in June Edward Dickinson dies suddenly in office; family robbed of good-byes
 1875 in June Mother's stroke disables her for life; August – Gib is born
 *1876 Helen Hunt Jackson visits (#9 in P.M.); friends rest of life in distance
 1891 David and Mabel Loomis Todd move to Amherst ("Rubicon" for Austin)
 1882 Mother dies; 1883 Gib dies at 8; 1884 Otis Lord dies
 *1886 Emily Dickinson dies May 15; funeral May 19; to grave in back pasture
 1890/ 1891/ 1896 Publications of poems edited by MLT and TWH
 1914 Martha Dickinson Bianchi (w/ Susan D.) *A Single Hound*; 1824 *Complete Poem*
 1960 Thomas Johnson's revealing *The Complete Poems of E D*
 1981 Manuscript Books Ed. Ralph W. Franklin; 1998 variorum ed. RWF
 1965 The Homestead Purchased by Amherst; 2003 The Evergreens added: Museum

Well over 1,000 books, including those of E.H. on bibliography of Syllabus. And here's a nicely illustrated site among MANY <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/a-timeline/>

("P.M." in some listings above refers to "Pivotal Moments" in Martha Ackmann's book)

A Note on What is NOT Included:

You may note that the poems you studied (or taught?) in high school or college are not in the syllabus – no “Because I could not stop for Death” (Fr479, F23) no “I’m Nobody,” not “A narrow fellow in the grass” (Fr1096, F4) and so forth. Nor are some of the less known but profoundly beautiful poems some of us know in our bones: “There’s a certain slant of light” (Fr320) comes first to mind. The selection of the 162 poems (by my count) that *are* part of the syllabus is determined because of their places in the fascicles, and proves one of my points (you can figure it out). However, we all have a list of the poems we could not live without.

Please keep track of the poems that are part of your history or that you happen onto as you look through the complete collection in Franklin’s edition. I will try to save time at the end of a class – or maybe even give time in the beginning – to class favorites.

here is Allen Tate in *Collected Essays*, 1959:

Her poetry is not like any other poetry of her time. . . . [I]t is far removed from us. It is a poetry of ideas, and it demands of the reader a point of view – not an opinion of the New Deal or of the settled attitude that is almost extinct in this eclectic age. . . . Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch” (Rpt. Ferlazzo 82)

Additional Resources:

Those who have my book will find 7 pages of bibliography of secondary sources. Books on Dickinson number 1,647 in the Library of Congress catalogue. The major biographies are those by Richard B. Sewall (*The Life of Emily Dickinson* 1974 but still my favorite); Cynthia Griffin Wolff (*Emily Dickinson* 1980); Alfred Habegger (*The Life of Emily Dickinson: My Wars Are Laid Away in Books* 2001), Martha Ackmann (*These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Life of Emily Dickinson* 2020).

Also – among the hundreds of electronic connections are these:

A new version of the Dickinson Electronic Archive <https://www.emilydickinson.org/links>

Obituary Written by Susan Dickinson [Obit \(digitalamherst.org\)](http://digitalamherst.org) or <file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/748ea3235e61008b83080b818e61390f.pdf>

Jeannette Schollaert’s “Introduction: Which Dickinson” part of the Dickinson Electronic Archive: [Introduction: Which Dickinson? by Jeannette Schollaert | Dickinson Electronic Archives \(emilydickinson.org\)](http://Introduction: Which Dickinson? by Jeannette Schollaert | Dickinson Electronic Archives (emilydickinson.org))

But the most important one for this class is the following, which contains the essential listing of fascicles in “Day 1 Encyclopedia” and other (optional) readings from my two books and from Richard Wilbur. Good luck in accessing the files. It was hard work preparing the 13 entries. Remember that if you print them each week, try not to print the dark title pages on each.

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ORKKzbxgyJQelwskuN0noAs9MTGI_6v?usp=s_haring

I welcome emails with questions, comments, suggestions. Please label them “Dickinson’s Books” and allow a little latitude in the answers: heginbotham@csp.edu

I will be “breathlessly interested” in our shared hours with Emily Dickinson – Ellie H.

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