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The Manuscripts of Emily Dickinson and Mediation

Recently there's been some debate about Emily Dickinson's poems. In 1981, R. W. Franklin published a book including scans of her manuscripts. In his introduction, he says they "resist translation into the conventions of print." This raised the question for a lot of scholars: why not? In this paper, I talk about three different theories. The first is by writer Eleanor Heginbotham. In her book, she suggests Dickinson organized poems into pairs; they can only be fully understood in this context. Most anthologies, though, reorganize her poems. Readers don't get the full range of meanings this way. The second theory is by Marta Werner. She says Dickinson experimented with her handwriting. She used different styles to convey different ideas. Finally, Domhnall Mitchell looks at the materials she used and how they affect her poems.

Even though these theorists approach Dickinson in different ways, they all have something in common. They remind me of John Guillory's essay "Genesis of the Media Concept." He talks about the idea of mediation. He says language is just a channel for our thoughts. This is why a word can have multiple significations. He also says there are different levels of mediation. Thoughts are mediated by words, but words can also be mediated by print. I think Dickinson deliberately played with these different levels in her manuscripts. The juxtaposition of poems, her handwriting, the materials she used—they're all kinds of mediation.

First, though, a little about the author. Emily Dickinson is known for experimenting with poetry. She often used slant rhyme. She's also famous for not giving her poems titles. Dickinson really didn't publish during her lifetime, even though she was very prolific. Some scholars say she would've. Others, though, say she didn't for a reason. It was her way of resisting the printing industry. She chose instead to circulate her manuscripts among her friends. She considered this in itself a form of publishing. Print simply can't convey how she wanted the poems spaced or her lineation.

Dickinson died on May 5, 1886. This was when her sister, Lavinia, discovered her manuscripts. Scholars can only guess when they were written, based on the watermarks on her papers. They believe, however, she produced most of them sometime between 1862 and 1864 (Mitchell 6). There might be more—scholars say she could've given some away. (And this doesn't include poems written on scraps of paper.) Lavinia brought them to her brother's wife. She also showed them to Mabel Todd Loomis. Both women were eager to publish Dickinson's poems. The very first anthology was printed sometime in the 1890s, edited by Loomis and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. They put the poems into four different sections: love, nature, eternity, and time. They also tried to standardize her punctuation, rhyme, capitalization, and spelling. In 1894, Todd released a book of just Dickinson's letters (scholars are now questioning if her prose and poetry can be separated). Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham published a version sometime during the 1930s. They tried to relate Dickinson's poems to events in her life. Finally, Ellen Hart and Martha Nell Smith published her letters to Susan Dickinson in 1998. They also implied the women had some kind of sexual relationship (Mitchell 6).

Possibly the two most respected versions, though, were edited by Thomas Johnson and Ralph Franklin respectively. Published in 1955, Johnson's edition put the poems in chronological order. He was notably the first editor to have access to all of her manuscripts (Mitchell 3). He only saw those belonging to Millicent Todd Bingham a couple times, though, and mostly worked from photocopies. Franklin, however, expanded the Dickinson cannon. He was also the first to reproduce her punctuation

and lineation. He even included marginalia, although he separated it from the poems. Franklin's 1998 edition consists of facsimiles of her manuscripts. It took the study of Dickinson in a completely new direction. Before, scholars had never questioned the different editions of her poems. Franklin, though, in his introduction suggests the manuscripts are more reliable. He says they "resist translation into the conventions of print" (viiii). This raises the question: how so?

Writer John Guillory might have an answer. He talks about mediation in his essay "Genesis of the Media Concept." He starts by tracing the evolution of communications. He says it began with John Locke, the "founding father" of theory. In "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" he says words represent ideas. But communication isn't always easy. Sometimes people misunderstand each other. This is because the meanings of words aren't fixed. Language acts as more of a medium, a channel for our thoughts. He believed, though, "…language should always be transparent to meanings" (339). He wanted to remedy what he thought of as a "defect" of language (337). His solution? He believed "we should adhere as closely as possible to common significations" (334). People should think about the most accepted meanings of words.

This was just the beginning of the concept of mediation, says Guillory. It really emerged, though, sometime during the eighteenth century with John Stuart Mill. While Locke wanted language to be "transparent," John Stuart Mill said it doesn't have to be. In his essay "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" he compares poetry with oratory (339). At first, he says they're both "'impassioned'" (340). But there's an important difference. He says "'eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard'" (340). Theorists have suggested this means "the poet…is granted the license to ignore the injunction to communicate" (340). Unlike other genres of writing, poetry isn't expected to be clear. This was a common theme during the Romantic period (340). We also see this in the writings of other theorists. For example, Roman Jakobson says, "By directing attention to the words of the message, as opposed to its 'meaning,' poetic function asserts the special quality of poetic language" (352). He was more

concerned with the sounds of words, and the effects they produce (351). Guillory concludes by saying, "No cultural work comes to us except through…multiple categorical mediations, never simply reducible to the effects of technical media" (361). There are different levels. Print is mediated by writing, and writing is mediated by words. We have to consider all of these things whenever we read a book, look at a painting, or listen to a song.

How does Guillory apply to Dickinson? I think she experimented with different levels of mediation in her manuscripts. She definitely played with the significations of words—this is the first level of mediation. For example, scholar Eleanor Heginbotham says Dickinson deliberately arranged her manuscripts. She organized her poems into pairs. She compares two poems that appear opposite each other in fascicle twenty-one. They begin with the lines "They shut me up in Prose—" and "This was a Poet—." By itself, the first appears to be the speaker's response to critics (6).

"They shut me up in Prose—

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet—

Because they liked me 'still'-

Still! Could themselves have peeped—

And seen my Brain—go round—

They might as wise have lodged

A Bird

For Treason—in the Pound—

Himself has but no will

And easy as a Star

Look down upon Captivity—

And laugh—no more have I—

Abolish his—"

(Heginbotham 3). She is constrained by prose—whether it's that of her family or readers, we don't know. But the speaker says, like a bird, she can't be silenced (3). She imagines herself to be a star, far way, looking down on everyone. She can't be touched. The poem is defiant, but there's also a feeling of futility. There will always be critics.

In the second, the speaker also talks about poetry. She says the writer is able to take something ordinary, and make it beautiful. A lot of scholars have suggested this poem is about flowers. "Attar" is another word for the extract from roses (17).

"This was a Poet—

It is That—

Distills amazing sense

From Ordinary meanings

And Attar so immense

From the familiar Species

That perished by the Door

We wonder it was not

Ourselves

Arrested it—before—

Of pictures the Discloser—

The Poet it is He—

Entitles us—by Contrast

To Ceaseless Poverty—

Of Portion—so unconscious,

The Robbing—could not harm—

Himself—to Him—a Fortune

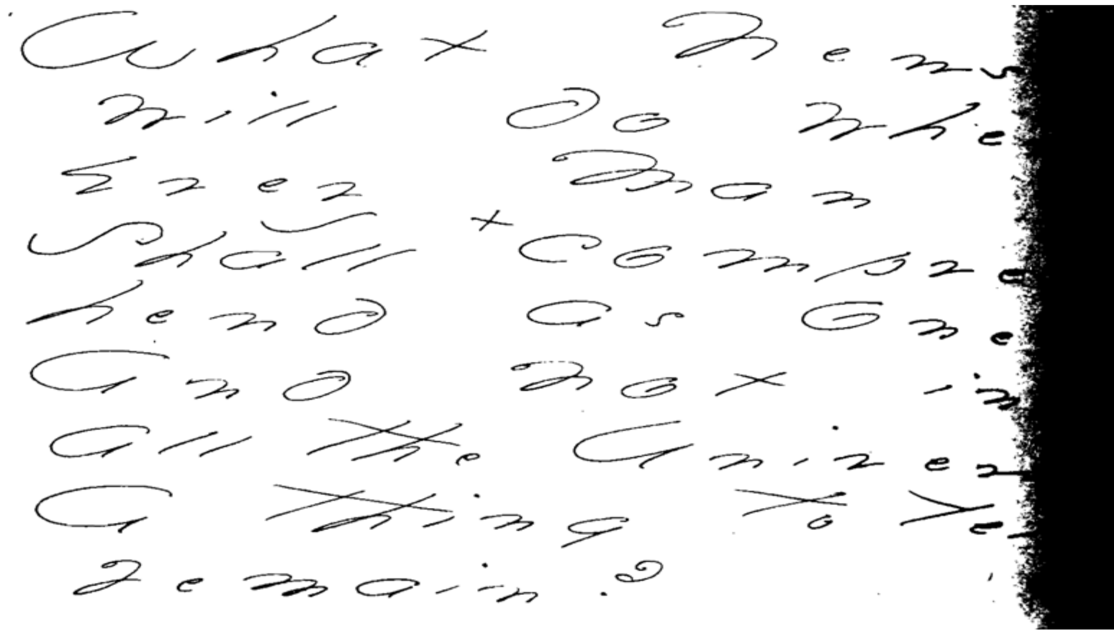
Exterior to Time—"

(Heginbotham 3). The word "species" in the sixth line could also refer to a plant. (Although scholars have suggested she's talking about humans.) Even though the flowers have "perished," words preserve them. They become impervious to the effects of time.

Together, though, these poems engage in a kind of conversation. We see things we wouldn't be able to otherwise. For example, "that" in the second line of the second poem is a little unclear. At first it seems to be referring to the narrator. Heginbotham, though, suggests it could also be about the speaker from the first poem. She's confined by prose. The second narrator, though, responds by releasing her (5). She's a true poet. She has the power to "arrest," unlike the first speaker. The words take on new meaning in this context. There are other structural similarities. For example, "still" in the first poem is mirrored by "distill" in the second. The latter then becomes a play on words. Heginbotham says the speaker actually means "de-still," or to unfreeze. Also, the first speaker never calls herself a poet. She just defines herself as the opposite of prose. Heginbotham also says the speaker in the second does something similar; she plays with negatives (17). The word "discloser" in line eleven becomes "dis-closer" or someone who opens things. Again, Dickinson plays with the significations of words. We can infer what the two speakers are talking about, though, from the juxtaposition of the poems.

Other scholars like Susan Howe and Marta Werner are more concerned with how Dickinson's handwriting affects her poems. This is another kind of mediation. In her essay "These Flames and

Generosities of the Heart," Howe says, "In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form—moves on a rigorous line" (145). She's not just referring to the content of Dickinson's poems, she's also talking about how they look aesthetically. This idea also shows up in Werner's book *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*. She thinks of Dickinson's manuscripts more as works of art; she calls them "word paintings" (23). She goes on to analyze Dickinson's orthography in great detail. Her manuscripts are characterized by two kinds of handwriting, she says—a more hurried style for rough drafts, and a neater style for final copies (21).



They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –

(Dickinson 1366, 465) This can affect how readers interpret her poems. We might consider a poem unfinished if it's written in her sloppy hand. We have no way of knowing for sure, though. Werner says Dickinson exploited this uncertainty. Werner also looks at the shapes of Dickinson's letters. She compares her Ds and Ys to candle wicks; the Ts appear to give words motion. All of these things demand a more fluid way of reading, she says (24). We miss all of these things, though, when her poems are put into print. Werner says they're "untranslatable" (50).

There's a third level of mediation in Dickinson's manuscripts. Domnhall Mitchell's talks about the materials she used, and how they affect her poems. First, though, he says editors have a duty to look at her manuscripts. He quotes scholar Ellen Hart:

> "'An editor establishes a text on which others will base their work…and, therefore, has the responsibilities of returning to original documents, staying informed about current trends in editing, and keeping to standards of accuracy. In my view, editing is a science, and sloppy scholarship is misconduct'" (49).

For this reason, he cites Franklin's 1981 edition as seminal. Dickinson's manuscripts are fragile and not everyone has access to them. Franklin, though, made them available to a wider audience. But Mitchell acknowledges there are some disadvantages to his edition. It's very expensive, and Dickinson's handwriting isn't always legible (23).

So what do we do with other editions of her poems? Mitchell says they're useful, but he also suggests imagining her poems in their original contexts. For example, he looks at a short piece she wrote often titled "Flowers are So Enticing." He compares it with different versions so we can see how it's mediated. First, he talks about writing conventions popular during her time. Most poems were usually titled. Dickinson's usually weren't (53). Mitchell asks, does adding a title change the meaning? Another example, he looks at the materials she used. The first draft of "Flowers" was written on a piece of paper, measuring approximately four by ten centimeters. He suggests Dickinson wrote on small scraps because they were easy to carry. It's now part of the collection at the Amherst College library. It reads:

> "Flowers are
> so enticing
> I fear that
> they are
> sins - like
> gambling
> or apost—
> tasy—"

(Mitchell 3-4). The narrator seems reluctant to speak. Mitchell says, "Even the splitting of 'apostasy'…might correspond to a kind of fear on the part of the speaker to confront the truth of her addiction and its consequences for her immortal soul" (5). She really wants to put off those last words.

There are very different versions, though (4). In 1958, Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward include a version in their book *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. It reads:

> "Flowers are so enticing I fear that they are sins – like gambling
> or apostasy"

(Mitchell 4.) Johnson and Ward completely change the meaning. They turn “Flowers” into prose. They also put emphasis on different words. “Gambling” appears at the end of the first line, giving it more focus. We lose some of the narrator’s hesitation to speak. Mitchell doesn’t say the editors are wrong, but he suggests they should’ve considered the dimensions of the paper. Finally, Mitchell offers his own interpretation:

> “Flowers are so enticing
>
> O fear that they are sins –
>
> Like gambling or apostasy – ”

(5). He tries to impose a kind of meter, but is he right? Mitchell says his version is a lot like some of Dickinson’s poems.   But it’s still very different from other poems published during her time. So how are we supposed to read her poems when there are so many versions? Mitchell concludes by saying, “Rigorous and sustained cross-referencing provides us with set of procedures, a critical apparatus …” (55). Simply imagining her poems in their original contexts isn’t enough. We need some kind of method for approaching her poems. This includes looking at her entire body of works, he says.

Some scholars don’t like this new approach to Dickinson. For example, scholar Lena Christensen says it can “…seriously undermine any critical project that bases its assumptions about Emily Dickinson’s work in print editions of her ‘poems’ and ‘letters’” (78). But I don’t think the pre- and post-Franklin approaches have to be mutually exclusive. Every edition of Dickinson’s poems is valuable. We just have to consider the “multiple levels and forms of media operating in the process of mediation,” like Guillory says (359).

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