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# Teaching Dickinson as a Gen(i)us: Emily Among the Women

Cheryl Walker  
*Scripps College*

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CHERYL WALKER

*Teaching Dickinson as a Gen(i)us:  
Emily Among the Women*

Frequently when teaching, one has recourse to a friendly anecdote, and since this paper is on the teaching of Emily Dickinson, I'm going to begin with an anecdote that has relevance to the issue of the uniqueness of Emily Dickinson. When I was doing research for *The Nightingale's Burden*, I was at the Houghton Library examining works in the Dickinson collection; by accident, I discovered a tantalizing letter. I had asked to look at *The Household Book of Poetry*, edited by Charles Dana and published in 1860. Though this apparently came from Austin and Susan's library, it might well have been shared with Emily, and I was interested in finding out which nineteenth-century women poets she might have known through this volume.<sup>1</sup>

As I opened the book, out fell a letter from Samuel Bowles, undated, beginning "My dear friends." It occurred to me with a tingling sensation that this letter (hidden in an overlooked volume) might never have been examined by Dickinson scholars. The tone of the letter was hard to identify but seemed to change at one point from gaiety to seriousness. Bowles begins by apologizing: "This book I meant to send you weeks ago, but it just came." After some flippant remarks about the volume as one of the necessities for any "well-regulated household," he suddenly becomes strangely emotional. One part of the letter in particular caught my eye, where Bowles says of his present:

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I send it to neither, because I do not dissociate you in my love. I fear I like you both better than I ought to; but it does me good, — we will pray it shall not harm you. Nor do I write my name in the flyleaf; when you forget, I shall want to have no reminders; and when we fade away from each other, you can give it away without tearing out a leaf!

Presumably this letter was written to Austin and Sue.<sup>2</sup>

But one cannot be sure. For instance, the implied context of the letter's recipients seems more closely tied to the Homestead than to the Evergreens. The letter abounds in references to "Mrs. D": "I hope that my getting no line today from Amherst does not signify that Mrs. D. is worse in her threatened illness, or that you suppose I don't care!" At another point, in a digression about what appears to be "bar soap," he writes: "in one of my earlier visitations I believe I alarmed Mrs. D by an inroad into another chamber for same."<sup>3</sup> A second hypothesis might be that the letter is written not to Austin and Sue but to Emily and Sue. My guess as to the dating of this letter would place it early in 1860, at a time when both Sue and Emily were in frequent contact with the editor of the *Springfield Republican*. It would make more sense for Samuel Bowles to send a book of poetry to the two women than to Austin and Sue. After his marriage Austin ceased concerning himself much with poetry. And then there are those peculiar sentiments about fearing his love might do them harm.<sup>4</sup>

My point about this letter is that in her cultural context Dickinson *could be* so intimately connected with another woman in her contemporary's mind that the two might be considered interchangeably. And this brings me to my central concern. This perspective contrasts sharply with the way Emily Dickinson was taught when I was a student. Typically, courses on American poetry at that time (and probably still today) strung together a series of genius poets, the high points in American literature: Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore. There was no cultural context to provide ligature. High art was understood to be only about language and, on the score of tropological discourse, any two poets could be connected, even across vast expanses of time and distance.

This is certainly one way to teach Emily Dickinson, who was indeed a genius and whose poetry, from one perspective, seems utterly unlike that of

her contemporaries, male or female. Yet in 1974 Richard Sewall made an important contribution to Dickinson studies when he called attention to the similarities in style of works written by various members of the Dickinson clan. He wrote: "Heightened rhetoric seems in this generation to have been a family phenomenon" (236). Susan's letters often sound like Emily's and are similarly replete with dashes. The one poem of Austin's that is still extant echoes the famous Dickinson style to a startling degree. Even Samuel Bowles' letter evokes Emily's epistolary style where he writes: "When you forget, *I* shall want to have no reminders."

Susan's famous letter about "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" is particularly Dickinsonian. After suggesting that the first verse might stand alone, Susan goes on to write: "Strange things always go alone — as there is only one Gabriel and one Sun — You never made a peer for that verse, and I *guess* you[r] kingdom does'nt hold one — I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never *can* again —" (201). Is Susan echoing Emily here, or is Emily echoing Susan when she says to T. W. Higginson: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry" (L342a).

In her 1989 *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, Joanne Dobson proposed that a "community of expression" united women writers at midcentury so that they shared elements of a common discourse. This semester I have been teaching a single author course on Emily Dickinson in which for one assignment I ask the students to look at selected poems by other women in *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*. There are almost too many poems for one week's reading: daisy poems by Frances Osgood to compare to Dickinson's daisy poems, "A Wild Night" by Julia Ward Howe to compare to "Wild Nights — Wild Nights," numerous poems by nineteenth-century women on the Dickinsonian themes of renunciation and secret sorrow. My central interest at the moment, however, is placing Dickinson's work side by side with that of another talented nineteenth-century woman poet: Rose Terry Cooke.

In her letters Dickinson never mentions Rose Terry (who married Rollin Cooke in 1873), but there is some reason to think that she knew at least some of Terry's poems. To begin with, Terry published many poems in the *Atlantic Monthly*, not to mention other journals that Dickinson might have seen.<sup>5</sup>

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According to Sewall, T. W. Higginson had worked closely with Terry, as he had with Helen Hunt Jackson and Harriet Prescott Spofford. In his conversations with Emily, they might have spoken of her. Another tantalizing bit of evidence is that for Christmas, in that highly-charged year of 1860, Samuel Bowles gave his wife Mary a copy of Rose Terry's first book of *Poems*.

There are phrases in that collection that definitely bring to mind phrases in poems by Emily Dickinson. For example, in "Monotropa" Terry writes about the exclusionary structure of the flower also known as Indian Pipe: "Never bird, nor bee, nor moth, / Inebriate with sunny sloth, / Dare intrude on hallowed ground."<sup>6</sup> In 1861, a number of months (at least) after the appearance of Terry's book, Emily Dickinson's "I taste a liquor never brewed" (#214) appeared in the Springfield Republican with the line "Inebriate of Air — am I," a distinct echo. Similarly, Rose Terry uses the word "punctual" in an odd way that recalls Dickinson's several uses of that word, including the ending of "New feet within my garden go — ": "And still the pensive Spring returns — / And still the punctual snow!" (#99). When I first read through Rose Terry's *Poems*, I was particularly struck by the beginning of "Daisies":

Fair and peaceful daisies,  
Smiling in the grass,  
Who hath sung your praises?  
Poets by you pass,  
And I alone am left to celebrate your mass.  
(116)

Was this poem murmuring in Emily Dickinson's inner ear when she wrote:

Further in Summer than the Birds  
Pathetic from the Grass  
A minor Nation celebrates  
It's unobtrusive Mass[.]  
(#1068)

The point I wish to make here is not that Dickinson was a plagiarist, as John Evangelist Walsh once suggested, but that she was a woman of her time,

and that it's useful for students to see how elements of her work connect her not only to Emerson, Whitman, and Hawthorne (as Karl Keller so gracefully argued) but to American women poets like Rose Terry Cooke. In *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty*, Keller tended to equate the influence of contemporary women with bluestocking feminism, "the hopeless ditch," as he called it, echoing a letter by Dickinson about her response to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. He emphasizes the repressiveness of Victorian culture, concluding: "The refinement it asked for in a woman of parts, when compared with the primitivism Emily Dickinson admitted to and was awfully self-conscious about, was a sign of deficient vitality. Distortion through awe gave her far more versions of life than they could approve of" (249).

Like Camille Paglia, Keller particularly values Dickinson's work for its excess. And until quite recently we did not see much in the way of excess in other women poets, tending to turn instead to works like *Wuthering Heights* for nineteenth-century evidence of what Hélène Cixous calls "the laugh of the Medusa." The Dickinson who relishes the dam breaking in "The Wind begun to knead the Grass—" (#824), who speaks in "The Soul has Bandaged moments" (#512) of "moments of Escape — / When bursting all the doors — / [the Soul] dances like a Bomb, abroad," indeed seemed like a unique figure whom we should allow, like ancestor's brocades, to stand by herself.

However, my research in recent years has tended to open up different perspectives on the Amherst poet. For instance, Dickinson's contemporary, Rose Terry Cooke, is just as excessive, just as violent, lustful, ecstatic. Take, for instance, her poem "Captive."

The Summer comes, the Summer dies,  
Red leaves whirl idly from the tree,  
But no more cleaving of the skies,  
No southward sunshine waits for me!

You shut me in a gilded cage,  
You deck the bars with tropic flowers,  
Nor know that freedom's living rage  
Defies you through the listless hours.

What passion fierce, what service true,  
Could ever such a wrong requite?

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What gift, or clasp, or kiss from you  
Were worth an hour of soaring flight?

I beat my wings against the wire,  
I pant my trammelled heart away;  
The fever of one mad desire  
Burns and consumes me all the day.

What care I for your tedious love,  
For tender word or fond caress?  
I die for one free flight above,  
One rapture of the wilderness!

The topos of this poem, the caged bird, is conventional among nineteenth-century women poets. Like Felicia Hemans, in her poem “The Wings of the Dove,” however, most imagine a flight toward freedom and then a return to the cage, as Dickinson does where she speaks of: “The Soul’s retaken moments — / When, Felon led along, / With shackles on the plumed feet, / And staples, in the Song, / The Horror welcomes her, again” (#512). Rose Terry Cooke, by contrast, refuses here to conform her imagination to the dictates of imprisonment or renunciation.

I don’t wish to suggest that nowhere in Cooke’s work does one find evidence of limits. She has many moments of recognizing inhibitions both external and internal. Though in “Basile Renaud” her speaker Clara murders her unfaithful lover and laughs about it, she is in prison at the end of the ballad, facing death. However, what makes Cooke’s work so striking is that like Dickinson she can also give voice to the hyperbole of desire. Sometimes it almost seems that she and Emily Dickinson are in dialogue with one another. Dickinson begins the conversation, let’s say, with Poem 80:

Our lives are Swiss —  
So still — so Cool —  
Till some odd afternoon  
The Alps neglect their Curtains  
And we look farther on!

*Italy* stands the other side!  
While like a guard between —

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The solemn Alps —  
The siren Alps  
Forever intervene!

Cooke responds in "Beyond":

The stranger wandering in the Switzer's land,  
Before its awful mountain tops afraid, —  
Who yet, with patient toil, hath gained his stand,  
On the bare summit where all life is stayed,  
  
Sees far, far down, beneath his blood-dimmed eyes,  
Another country, golden to the shore,  
Where a new passion and new hopes arise,  
Where Southern blooms unfold forevermore.  
  
And I, lone sitting by the twilight blaze,  
Think of another wanderer in the snows,  
And on more perilous mountain-tops I gaze,  
Than ever frowned above the vine and rose.  
  
Yet courage, soul! nor hold thy strength in vain,  
In hope o'ercome the steeps God set for thee;  
For past the Alpine summits of great pain,  
Lieth thine Italy  
(15)

Would I argue that Cooke's poem is as powerful as Dickinson's? No, I wouldn't. But many poems by Rose Terry Cooke are quite powerful. Furthermore, as Cary Nelson argues in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (1989), "In challenging and expanding the canon — and problematizing its place in literary studies — we need to learn how to value, almost recreate, not only poetry we can now recognize as aesthetically compelling (the criteria for which are always changing and always ideological) but also poetry of significant historical and cultural interest" (41).

It seems to me important for my students to understand both Dickinson's genius and the lie of the I in that word. For Dickinson did not stand utterly outside her time when she wrote her poetry (who could?). She also belonged



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to a genus, a category of individuals marked by common characteristics. That category, as I argued a long time ago in *The Nightingale's Burden*, included other nineteenth-century American women poets whose poses Dickinson was certainly aware of and whose limitations she felt herself dedicated to surpass.

For some reason the relevance of the cultural category of nineteenth-century American women poets has been repeatedly rejected. Joanne Dobson, Barton Levi St. Armand, Paula Bennett, Alicia Ostriker, and myself have tried to restore some measurement of Dickinson's relationship to her sister poets, but as recently as 1988 David Reynolds in *Beneath the American Renaissance* insisted that Dickinson's "treatment of highly experimental themes through dense images in rhythmic poetry . . . constituted her greatest departure from other women writers of the day" (432). Having disposed of women's poetry as a relevant cultural category, he then goes on to compare her strategies of disruption and her sensationalist imagination to those of men (and a few women) prose writers.

If we wish our students to understand more acutely the nature of Dickinson's poetic achievement, her genius, we should offer them more rather than fewer opportunities for comparison. We should also, it seems to me, refuse the temptation to provide only a few dull poems to place side by side with hers in order to set her up as an iconoclast and an icon. There are many interesting nineteenth-century women poets whose work Dickinson's might illuminate rather than simply overshadow. Despite what Karl Keller said, despite what she herself said, Emily Dickinson wasn't "the only kangaroo among the beauty."

*Notes*

1. The woman poets included in this volume are Maria Brooks, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Caroline Gilman, Felicia Hemans, Maria Lowell, Lavinia Stoddard, and Amelia Welby.
2. This volume is contained in the Austin Dickinson collection at the Houghton Library. Interestingly, there is an inscription on the flyleaf which says: "Austin and Sue, from Samuel Bowles." But it is not written in his handwriting.
3. Samuel Bowles' handwriting is extremely difficult to decipher, and I offer these "translations" with some hesitation.

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4. Richard Sewall discusses Bowles' peculiar relationship with several members of the Dickinson clan in the second volume of his biography. He too quotes a highly charged letter (to Austin) that suggests Bowles' strong feelings for both Austin and Sue. "I could not afford to lose you, to go on without you, & I do not mean to — if I can hold you" (II, 472). He also argues that Emily was in love with Bowles for many years.
5. The list of other magazines in which Cooke published poems is very long and includes *Harper's*, *Scribner's Monthly*, *Galaxy*, and the *North American Review*.
6. Most of the poems by Cooke I quote here are contained in my anthology, *American Women Poets of the nineteenth Century*. Where a poem is not so included, I will indicate the source.

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