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Emily Dickinson and Class

Betsy Erkkila

Nowhere is the controversy over the relative merits and limits and possible interdependence of class and gender as categories of historical and cultural analysis more evident than in recent work on Emily Dickinson.¹ From Rebecca Patterson's early emphasis on Dickinson's erotic relationships with women in *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1951), to Adrienne Rich's important essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (1975), to more recent work by Sandra Gilbert, Joanne Feit Diehl, Barbara Mossberg, Vivian Pollak, and Wendy Martin, among others, feminist critics have overturned traditional representations of Dickinson as sentimental recluse, "Belle of Amherst," unrequited lover, or sublimated neurotic. But through an almost exclusive focus on gender, psychosexuality, and patriarchy as the only oppression, feminist critics have also tended paradoxically to take Dickinson out of history, (re)privatizing her in the space of the home and the psyche, and subsuming the particularity and difference of Dickinson's life and work into a repeat across time of the same familial romance: the story of the daughter's revolt against a perpetually demonized and transhistorical patriarch and her desire to return to a preoedipal and prehistorical mother.²

In this essay, I would like to problematize the historical grounds of these polarizations by (re)situating Dickinson as fully and complexly as possible in relation to the social, political, and cultural struggles of her times. While it is certainly true to say that Dickinson was not an overtly political poet in the same sense that Whitman was, it is simply not true to say that she had no politics and no ideological investment in a particular order of power. Dickinson was, in fact, born into a more publicly active and politically engaged family than Whitman: her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, helped to found Amherst Academy (1814) and later Amherst College (1821); her father, Edward Dickinson, and her brother, Austin, were actively involved in public projects and in the institutional ordering and administration of church, college, and town over many years. As William Tyler writes in his *History of Amherst College* (1873), Edward Dickinson "has been so long and so fully identified with

the town, the first parish and the College, that the history of either of them cannot be written without writing the principal events of his life" (539). Following the panic of 1837, Edward Dickinson also served two terms (1838–40) as a state representative in the Massachusetts General Court and later as a state senator (1842–44) and a member of the Governor's Council (1845–47). In 1852, at a time of intensified struggle over the issue of slavery, he was elected representative to Congress from the Tenth District of Massachusetts. Later, in 1873, only a year before his death, he was elected again to serve in the Massachusetts General Court.

But politics is not only or always an active involvement or concern with the governance of the state; politics is also the entire network of power relations ordering a society. If Dickinson was a more private poet than Whitman, the metaphysical and linguistic space of her poems is nonetheless traversed by her ideological assumptions and presumption as a member of New England's political—and Whig—elite. In this essay, I shall seek to "de-naturalize" and make visible the historical and specifically class formation of Dickinson's life and work.³

"In the family," Engels wrote, the man "is the bourgeois, the woman represents the proletariat" (89).⁴ Yet Dickinson's sister, Lavinia, described the economy of the Dickinson household in terms that suggest that Dickinson was not at all a proletarian in any modern or Marxist sense of the term: "As for Emily, she was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching for the rewarding person to come, but she was a very busy person herself. *She had to think*—she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to keep track of" (Bingham 413–14; emphasis added). While father "believed" and worked as a lawyer in the Amherst community, mother "loved," and Lavinia managed the house, Dickinson *thought*; meanwhile, the Dickinson household, stable, and grounds were supported and maintained over many years by a number of Irish immigrant servants, including, at the time of Dickinson's death in 1886, six Irish workmen who carried her body across the fields to the family plot (Dickinson, *Letters* 3: 959–60).

As the privileged daughter of the town squire, Dickinson did not, like some of her middle-class New England sisters, have to enter the factory system that was then emerging locally. Nor did she, like some of the poorer women and children of Amherst, have to "put out" straw hats for David Mack's hat factory. Within the domestic economy of the Dickinson household, as

in the larger political economy of nineteenth-century America, Dickinson was the “lady” and the intellectual whose leisure, freedom, and space “to think” were made possible by the manual labor and proletarianization of others.

If in relation to the larger social and industrial transformation of the US in the nineteenth century, the Dickinson household appears to represent the interests and economy of an emergent middle class, in the Amherst community, it enjoyed the status and rank of an aristocratic and feudal estate. Amherst residents consistently referred to the Dickinson house as the “Homestead” and the “Mansion,” terms that reveal a typically American slippage between farmhouse and manor, yeoman and aristocrat, an agrarian American order and an older English feudal order. Like his father Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Edward Dickinson was the local squire, which meant technically that he was a justice of the peace, but which gave him the status of an English country gentleman and linked him with an older New England order of rule by a landed squirearchy of wealth and royal entitlement.⁵ Edward Dickinson, wrote his niece Clara Newman Turner in 1894, “was a grand type of a class now extinct—An Old-School-Gentleman-Whig!” (Sewall 60).

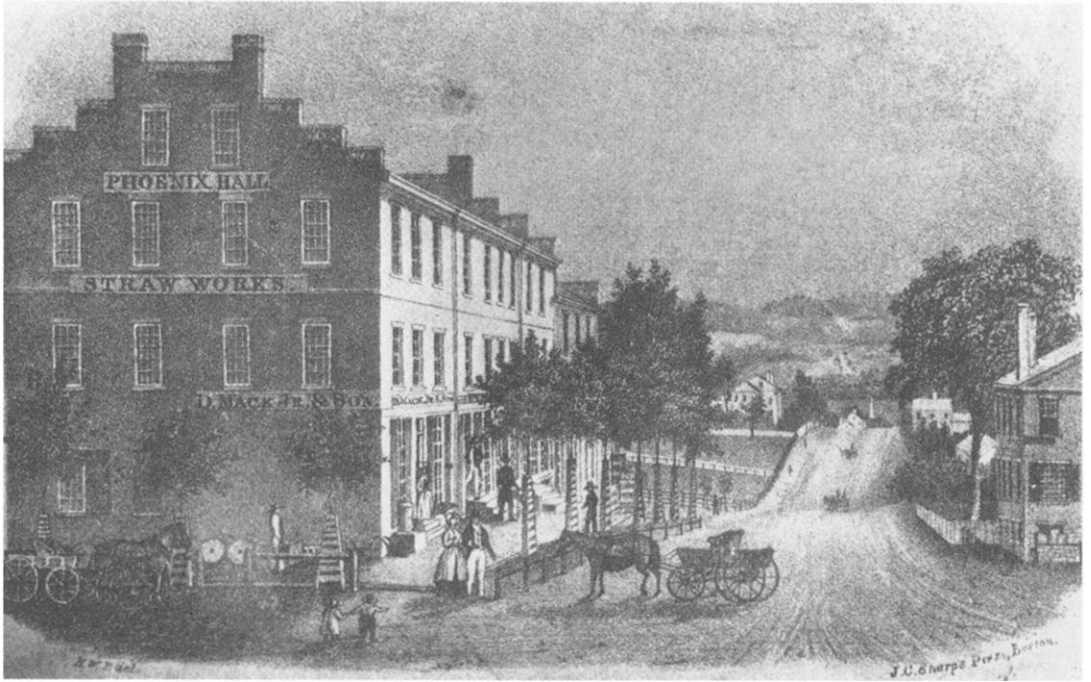
Both within and outside the Dickinson family the sense of class consciousness and the potentially dangerous permeability of class boundaries was so strong that when, in 1856, Austin Dickinson married Sue Gilbert, whose father was a local tavern owner, he was looked upon as having married beneath his class. “The whole situation was another illustration of the impossibility of a marriage between different grades of society ever becoming a perfect fusion,” wrote Clara Newman, who, along with her sister Anna, came to live with her uncle in 1852, and who lived with Austin and Sue after their marriage in 1856. “Sue’s father was a ‘tavern keeper’ of decidedly convivial habits, and Austin’s father was a dignified gentleman, a lawyer of the old school,” Newman noted. “The two could hardly have known of each other’s existence, mentally, at least. In those early days the democratic mixing of upper and lower classes was, to be sure, much more easily accomplished than in these later and stricter days of preserving family and training. And Sue always made a point of associating principally with daughters of the better class” (Sewall 282).⁶ Newman’s comments suggest that the famous “War between the Houses” of Emily and Sue was, in part, a class war, rooted in the socioeconomic differences between Sue Gilbert as the orphaned, mobile, and socially aspiring daughter of an Amherst tavern owner and Emily Dick-

inson as the privileged, homebound, and socially endowed daughter of the town squire. Unlike Sue, Dickinson could exercise the class privilege of choosing to stay at home and ultimately not to marry, reproduce, or circulate, either herself or her poems.

The ways Dickinson's sense of identity and status became bound up with the Dickinson property and her own fear of a "democratic mixing" of classes are suggested by a dream she had when she was a student at Mount Holyoke. In October 1847, she wrote to Austin: "Well, I dreamed a dream & Lo!!! Father had failed & mother said that 'our rye field which she & I planted, was mortgaged to Seth Nims.' I hope it is not true but do write soon & tell me for you know 'I should expire with mortification' to have our rye field mortgaged, to say nothing of it's falling into the merciless hands of a loco!!!" (*Letters* 1: 48–49). In addition to registering a more general Whig fear that the Democrats were censoring the mails, Dickinson's dream registers her protest against the Jacksonian democratization of the civil service and her personal anxiety that the Dickinson property and class position were under siege by the leveling spirit of Jacksonian democracy represented locally by the locofoco postmaster Seth Nims.

In the same letter, Dickinson half-humorously protested the expansionist and nationalist Democratic policies of President Polk, policies that had led to the Mexican War and that seemed to endanger Dickinson's own sense of identity, status, and place in rural New England. "Has the Mexican war terminated yet & how?" she asked her brother. "Do you know of any nation about to besiege South Hadley? If so, do inform me of it, for I would be glad of a chance to escape, if we are to be stormed" (*Letters* 1: 49).

Dickinson's fear of downward mobility was not completely unfounded. Her childhood and adolescence had been marked by the panic of 1837 and a depression in the economy from which the country did not fully recover until the mid-forties. During these years, the privileged socioeconomic status of the Dickinson family was not at all secure. Samuel Fowler built the Dickinson "Mansion" in 1813, at a time of rapid growth in manufacturing, agriculture, and the service industries in the Amherst community. After 1830 and particularly following the panic of 1837, however, as Amherst shifted from self-sufficiency to dependence on outside markets and control of manufacturing moved from independent household production to the factory, the town began to lose manufacturing strength and population both to the large-scale industrial development of eastern cities and to the expansion of settlement westward (see Taylor; Clark;



Brown). In 1830, the year of Emily Dickinson's birth, her father had to buy half of the family "Mansion" on Main Street from her grandfather because the latter had lost the family fortune by overinvesting his time and money in public projects such as the founding of Amherst College.⁷ In 1833, Samuel Fowler Dickinson departed for Ohio in financial ruin, and his half of the "Mansion" was sold to an outsider, General David Mack, who came to Amherst to set up a factory for the manufacture and sale of straw hats (Fig. 1).

Left with half a house, a failing law practice, and his father's debt, Edward Dickinson experienced a sense of panic that he was losing status and ground to a new breed of entrepreneurs. "I must make money in some way," he wrote to his wife on 7 September 1835. "To be shut up forever 'under a bushel' while hundreds of mere Jacanapes are getting their tens of thousands & hundreds of thousands, is rather too much for my spirit—I must spread myself over more ground—half a house, & a rod square for a garden, won't answer my turn" (Leyda 1: 30).⁸ During his tenure as a representative in the Massachusetts state legislature from 1838 to 1840, his personal fortunes do not appear to have improved much. By 1840, Mack's prosperous hat business enabled him to buy the entire Dickinson mansion. The Dickinson family moved to a house on North Pleasant

Fig. 1. 1840 lithograph of Main Street provides earliest glimpse of Dickinson homestead (center background), with David Mack & Son Straw Works in foreground. (The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst, MA.)



Fig. 2. 1858 lithograph by Bachelder of the family homestead, which Edward Dickinson repurchased in April 1855 from Samuel Mack. (The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst, MA.)

Street where they lived until 1855, when an improvement in their finances enabled them to repurchase the “Old Homestead” from Mack (Fig. 2).⁹

As an “Old-School-Gentleman-Whig,” Edward Dickinson embodied the paradox of the Whig position at a time when an older New England elite of landed wealth and social status was eroding under the pressure of an ascendant capitalist economy of money and individual enterprise. For all his aspiration to be an English country gentleman, his entitlement in the US was neither natural nor hereditary but grounded in his possession of a certain amount of land and, increasingly, large amounts of money. Edward Dickinson’s fear of being “shut up forever ‘under a bushel’ while hundreds of mere Jacanapes are getting their tens of thousands & hundreds of thousands” represents a moment of socioeconomic crisis when the traditional New England ruling class realizes that it is about to be displaced not only by the so-called “self-made men” of the Jacksonian era

but by the entrepreneurial and progressive logic of Whig economic policy itself.

During the fifties, as the Whig party dissolved under the pressure of the slavery controversy and Edward Dickinson held to the conservative party faith of Daniel Webster, even as many of his friends joined the newly formed Republican party, Emily Dickinson sought to resist the forces of democratic, commercial, industrial, and nationalist transformation by enclosing herself in ever smaller social units—first within Amherst, then within her house, and ultimately within her room and the space of her own mind. Not only did she set herself against the abolitionist, reformist, and democratizing energies of the times, she also set herself against the public and political engagement of her father. When he was serving as a representative in Congress between 1852 and 1854, Emily Dickinson resented the fact that he, like her grandfather, neglected the family for the public interest. “Caesar [Father] is such ‘an honorable man,’ ” she wrote Austin in arch protest against the rhetoric of republicanism, “that we may all go to the Poor House, for all the American Congress will lift a finger to help us” (*Letters* 1: 275).

Moreover, while her father was instrumental in bringing the Belchertown Railroad to Amherst in 1853, she looked upon the railroad as an intrusion from abroad that quickened the pace of life and thrust Amherst into the grip of outsiders and the “almighty dollar.” “Our house is crowded daily with the members of this world,” she wrote Austin; “the ‘poor in this world’s goods,’ and the ‘almighty dollar,’ and ‘what in the world are they after’ continues to be unknown—But I hope they will pass away, as insects on vegetation, and let us reap together in golden harvest time—that is you and Susie and me and our dear sister Vinnie” (*Letters* 1: 257).

Although Dickinson’s acts of self-enclosure were at least in part a means of protecting her artistic creation, they were also class acts, manifesting her desire to define herself against and distinguish herself from the potentially polluting incursions of the democratic multitude. Dickinson was driven by a “suppressed and ungratified desire for distinction,” wrote her childhood friend Emily Fowler Ford. “She wore white, she shut herself away from her race as a mark of her separation from the mass of minds” (Todd 132). It was this same separation from the “common daily strife” of the masses that Ford emphasized in a poem to Dickinson published in the *Springfield Republican* on 11 January 1891: “Nor will you touch a hand, or greet a face,— / For common daily strife to you is rude” (“Eheu! Emily Dickinson”). Although Ford may be merely an-

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gry because Dickinson had refused to see even her in 1882, her characterization corresponds with Dickinson's own representation of herself and others in her letters and in her poems.

As a student at Mount Holyoke in 1847, Dickinson wrote her friend Abiah Root: "When I left home, I did not think I should find a companion or a dear friend in *all the multitude*. I expected to find *rough & uncultivated manners*" (*Letters* 1: 55; emphasis added). This sense of social difference, and the urge to define herself against and apart from the "rough & uncultivated" multitude, is a recurrent theme of Dickinson's poems (poem numbers cited are in *Poems*):

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone— (#303)

Whether referring to an act of self-enclosure or enclosure within a specific class, what Dickinson describes in a monarchical language of emperors, chariots, and divine right is a rigidly stratified social order of rank, exclusion, and difference in which the "Door" of one's "own Society" is closed to all but a select few chosen from an "ample nation."

Similarly, in "*One Life* of so much Consequence!" and "The Soul's Superior instants," the poet sets herself omnipotently above and beyond the "thick" and "dense" multitude, identifying with a monarchical and privileged elite "*perceptible— / Far down the dustiest Road!*" (#270). Even Dickinson's poems of romantic entrapment, including "Mute thy Coronation," "I met a King this afternoon!" "The *Sun—just touched the Morning*," "The Court is far away—," and "He put the Belt around my life—," are enacted as scenes of submission to superior men—dukes, masters, wheeling kings, and even God himself as "a distant—stately Lover—." In fact, in Dickinson's most anthologized poem, "Because I could not stop for

Death—,” Death himself comes courting as an aristocratic gentleman with horses and carriage to take the lady of “Gossamer” and “Tulle” for an “immortal” ride.

Like nineteenth-century Whig political rhetoric, the language of Dickinson’s poems slips between the old and the new, between an aristocratic language of rank, royalty, and hereditary privilege, and a Calvinist language of spiritual grace, personal sanctity, and divine election, in which the aristocratic ideals of hierarchy and social subordination are displaced from the secular to the divine arena. Although Dickinson never converted to Calvinism, its terms continued to shape the language, imagery, and conceptual framework of her poems. For her, as for other conservative New England Whigs, the notion of a divinely elected spiritual aristocracy predestined to power served ultimately to support a hierarchical social order against the more public, egalitarian rhetoric of the time. In fact, until the nineteenth century, in New England at least, the Calvinist notion of an aristocracy of the spirit had never existed apart from the fact of an economic elite who actually did rule politically, socially, and culturally.

Thus, in the poem “Mine—by the Right of the White Election!” Dickinson deploys a simultaneously aristocratic and Calvinist language of rank, royal entitlement, and divine right:

Mine—by the Right of the White Election!
 Mine—by the Royal Seal!
 Mine—by the Sign in the Scarlet prison—
 Bars—cannot conceal! (#528)

Setting the speaker’s own right to possession against the claims of some unnamed antagonist, the poem inscribes the social and territorial as well as racial imperatives of New England’s ruling class. Although the poet speaks the language of Revelations, here as in “A solemn thing—it was—I said— / A woman—white—to be—” and other Dickinson poems, the language of the “Right” of “White Election” cannot finally be separated from nineteenth-century debates about the racial hegemony of the white race and of New Englanders in particular.

Dickinson’s elitism is evident in her almost complete silence on the major social issues of her time, and, when she did speak, in her phobic and seemingly genocidal attitude toward foreigners and the masses. “Vinnie and I say masses for poor Irish boys souls,” she wrote to her brother Austin in 1851, when he was having trouble disciplining his Irish students as a teacher in the Boston schools. “So far as *I* am concerned I should like

to have you kill some—there are so many now, there is no room for the Americans” (*Letters* 1: 113). Dickinson’s xenophobia was shared by her brother, who later became active in the Know-Nothing party. Austin was “aristocratic, contemptuous,” remembered Millicent Todd Bingham, “the spare old Squire who despised the common herd” (Sewall 297; 299).

In her letters and poems, Dickinson assumes an aristocratic order of rank and difference as part of the natural order of things. Writing to her friends Josiah and Elizabeth Holland in November 1858, she referred to one of her father’s workmen as a “serf” as she reflected on the democratic blurring of social bounds brought by death as the great leveler. “I buried my garden last week—our man, Dick, lost a little girl through the scarlet fever,” Dickinson wrote, in a passage that disturbs not so much because she equated the loss of her garden with the loss of a workman’s child, but because she placed her own loss an aristocratic and “purple” notch above the loss of the “serf’s child.” “Ah! dainty—dainty Death! Ah! democratic Death!” Dickinson exclaimed, “Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden,—then deep to his bosom calling the serf’s child!” “Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things?” (*Letters* 2: 341), she asked, as her psychic and metaphysical fear of “democratic Death” begins to merge with a material and historical fear of losing the Dickinson property, goods, and name to the disruptive Jacksonianism represented by the “loco” postmaster Seth Nims.

This assumption of a natural social order of class and race informs several poems, including most notably “Color—Caste—Denomination—,” which turns on the ironic contrast between a hierarchical and time-bound order of race and class difference, in which dark is subordinated to light, “Umber” to “Chrysalis of Blonde,” and a “diviner” and timeless order in which these marks of social distinction will be erased by Death’s “Democratic fingers”:

Color—Caste—Denomination—
These—are Time’s Affair—
Death’s diviner Classifying
Does not know they are—

As in sleep—All Hue forgotten—
Tenets—put behind—
Death’s large—Democratic fingers
Rub away the Brand—

If Circassian—He is careless—
If He put away
Chrysalis of Blonde—or Umber—
Equal Butterfly—

They emerge from His Obscuring—
What Death—knows so well—
Our minuter intuitions—
Deem unplausible— (#970)

Although the poem gestures toward a “large” and essentially utopian social order in which “All Hue” will be “forgotten,” the speaker suggests that in time, at least, democracy is impossible. Any democratic “Obscuring” of the time-bound “Brand” of race and class difference, she concludes, “Our minuter intuitions— / Deem unplausible—.” What the poem suggests finally is that the speaker’s “minuter intuitions” have led her to “deem” democracy “unplausible” and indeed rather horrifying not only within but beyond social time.

“The Malay—took the Pearl—” assumes a similarly unchangeable social order of race and class difference and subordination:

The Malay—took the Pearl—
Not—I—the Earl—
I—feared the Sea—too much
Unsanctified—to touch—

Praying that I might be
Worthy—the Destiny—
The Swarthy fellow swam—
And bore my Jewel—Home—

Home to the Hut! (#452)

The poem appears to use the language of racial and class difference to represent an essentially egalitarian spiritual order in which all—blacks as well as whites, “Swarthy” fellows as well as the “Earl”—have access to the “Jewel” of God’s grace. Feminists have also read the poem as an articulation of a specifically female anxiety about “the primitivism of male dominance” and the fear of “homosexual conquest” (Pollak 156). But these readings gloss over the fact that the “The Malay” is a dark man of a lower social order and that the entire poem turns on the

irony that “The Swarthy fellow,” who is assumed to be less worthy, “took the Pearl” which the speaker as “the Earl” implicitly deserves. Indeed, the “Pearl” that the Malay “took” is not his at all; it is “my Jewel,” belonging originally, it would seem, to the white and aristocratic speaker.

Read this way, the “Jewel” assumes a more specifically material and historical significance as a sign perhaps of social plenitude, possession, and the fulfillment of earthly desire. The poem—which was written at the time of the Civil War—appears to describe a historical situation in which others, specifically black others, are making gains, while the speaker, an aristocrat, is being “undone.” In fact, the speaker’s sense of deprivation and loss interestingly parallels Dickinson’s father’s sense that “mere Jacanapes” were “getting their tens of thousands & hundreds of thousands” while he was losing ground (Leyda 1: 30) and Emily Dickinson’s own anxiety that the family might be losing ground amid large-scale social changes in ownership and power.

Dickinson manifested little concern about the problems of slavery, industrialism, the urban poor, and the dispossession of American Indians that sent other New England women to fight publicly against social injustice. Even when Dickinson does appear to address the social problems of her time, in a poem such as “The Beggar Lad—dies early—,” she seems removed from the subject; the “Beggar Lad” becomes a mere vehicle for a conventional spiritual allegory about the ultimate redress of God.¹⁰ Defining herself against not only the lower orders, but against certain categories of middle-class women, including the Christian benevolent model of true womanhood represented by Mary Lyons at Mount Holyoke and such female proponents of Whig ideology as Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale, Dickinson could be quite hard-hearted about the masses being dispossessed and impoverished by the same forces of socioeconomic transformation that threatened her own status in rural Amherst.¹¹ In an 1850 letter to her friend Jane Humphrey, Dickinson mocked the benevolent notion of women as the feeders, caretakers, and reformers of the world represented by the local sewing society to which she refused to belong: “Sewing Society has commenced again—and held its first meeting last week—now all the poor will be helped—the cold warmed—the warm cooled—the hungry fed—the thirsty attended to—the ragged clothed—and this suffering—tumbled down world will be helped to it’s feet again—which will be quite pleasant to all. I dont attend—notwithstanding my high approbation—which must puzzle the public exceedingly. I am already set down as

one of those brands almost consumed—and my hardheartedness gets me many prayers” (*Letters* 1: 84).

To Dickinson and her sister, the labor abuses, accidents, and increasing loss of lives brought by industrial transformation became a form of sensational entertainment for the gleeful consumption of the leisure class: “Who writes those funny accidents, where railroads meet each other unexpectedly, and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally?” Dickinson asked Samuel Bowles, the editor the *Springfield Republican*, which she read every night. “The author, too, relates them in such a sprightly way,” Dickinson noted, “that they are quite attractive. Vinnie was disappointed to-night, that there were not more accidents—I read the news aloud, while Vinnie was sewing” (*Letters* 1: 264).

“She’s tearful—if she weep at all— / For blissful Causes,” Dickinson later wrote in the poem “She’s happy, with a new Content—,” satirizing the reformist energies of her New England sisters (#535). Similarly, in the poem “What Soft—Cherubic Creatures— / These Gentlewomen are—,” Dickinson satirized the pious and pure model of true womanhood associated with middle-class women who were, as Gerda Lerner observes, aspiring “to the status formerly reserved for upper-class women” (25–26). But while Dickinson mocked what she called the “Dimity Convictions” of the Angel in the House, she could also write such lines of pure domestic—and Whig—sentiment as “If I can stop one Heart from breaking / I shall not live in vain” (#919). Moreover, by enclosing herself in the traditionally female space of the home, she ends by enforcing the sexual division of labor and the division of public and private spheres that was at the base of the new bourgeois social order she seeks to resist and protest in her life and work.

Within the Dickinson household and in her poems, Dickinson was in some sense the spokesperson and representative of older ruling class interests.¹² In setting herself against Whig commercial interests and her father’s initiative in bringing the Belchertown Railroad to Amherst, Dickinson identified herself with the “country party” tradition of the eighteenth century and the more specifically Federalist, anticommercial, and ruling class heritage of John Adams and later John Quincy Adams.¹³ In fact, Dickinson’s fears about the train’s arrival in Amherst were borne out by its ultimately debilitating effects on the Amherst community. If it brought business, goods, and what Dickinson called the “almighty dollar” to Amherst, it also linked the town with large-scale and mechanized national and international markets, destroyed its nascent manufacturing econo-

my, and eroded Amherst's population growth and status as an educational center by carrying young people out of the town to points east and west in search of their fortunes (see Taylor).

Although Dickinson contested Whig economic policies, she subscribed to an essentially Whig moral economy that fostered a personal and social regime of self-renunciation, hierarchy, and control, particularly control of a potentially unruly body. "I do not care for the body," Dickinson wrote Abiah Root in 1850, "the bold obtrusive body—Pray, marm, did you call me?" (*Letters* 1: 103). Figuring the body as a servant of the lower class, Dickinson registers her experience of the body as a site not only of her oppression, the place where female nature, and in particular the female capacity for reproduction, can be made to serve the needs of man and race; the body is also the site of her identification with and potential invasion by the "rough & uncultivated" desires she associated with the lower class.

Over and over in her poems, from "I dreaded that first Robin, so, / But He is mastered, now," to such erotic dream poems as "I started Early—took my Dog—" and "In Winter in my Room," to more explicitly didactic poems such as "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue—," Dickinson registers a fear of being overwhelmed by and a corresponding desire to retreat from the body, sexuality, and the specifically corporeal dimensions of experience. On a fundamental level, Dickinson's poems are about disciplining rather than unleashing sexual and social desire; they are about policing, mastering, and controlling the body within the regime of the mind, the soul, and the imagination. This dread of physical experience and the corresponding desire for social control are, I would argue, bound up not only with a fear of the body as a site of female colonization but with an essentially conservative Whig distrust of the body of the democratic masses.

"How do most people live without thoughts," Dickinson once asked, in a comment that suggests her own superior sense that "most people" lived on the level of the body "without thoughts" (*Letters* 2: 474). Within the political order of Dickinson's verse, the multitude and the democratic masses are consistently demonized. In "The Popular Heart is a Cannon first—" and "The Ditch is dear to the Drunken Man," the masses are associated with intemperance, criminality, and an explosive violence without past or future. The poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" appears to parody the politics of title and place:

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
 How public—like a Frog—
 To tell your name—the livelong June—
 To an admiring Bog! (#288)

From a gender point of view, the poet's lack of settled identity as "Nobody" represents a form of liberation from the structures of social authority that define and limit a woman's life. But this seemingly democratic "Nobody" masks an aristocrat who refuses to be defined in and through the demonized body of the democratic masses figured as "an admiring Bog."

Like de Toqueville in *Democracy in America*, Dickinson was critical of the dull conformity of democratic and majority rule. "'George Washington was the Father of his Country'—'George Who?' That sums all Politics to me," she wrote toward the close of her life (*Letters* 3: 849), registering her protest against the process of democratization and national political integration that led, in the post-Civil War period, to the enfranchisement of ignorant masses who did not even know the fundamentals about American heritage. If Dickinson's poems bear traces of the antiauthoritarian political rhetoric of her times, that rhetoric is translated not into a dream of democracy but into a royalist dream of rule by hereditary and divine right. Thus, in the poem "I'm ceded—I've stopped being Their's—," Dickinson deploys the politically charged language of secession, but the secession she imagines is not in favor of a sovereign republican self or state. Rather, "With Will to choose, or to reject," she secedes into an essentially monarchical order in which she will be "Queen."

Within the context of nineteenth-century American democratic culture, Dickinson's poetry becomes particularly—and politically—interesting, for it articulates an aristocratic social ideal that had been suppressed in the more public political rhetoric of the Whig party. Whereas Douglass, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, and many of the women writers of her age, including Stowe, Fuller, Child, and Jacobs, embraced the democratic language of republican ideology even as they turned that language to a critique of the actual practice of the American government, Dickinson returned to a pre-Revolutionary and aristocratic language of rank, titles, and divine right to assert the sovereignty of her self as absolute monarch. Not only does she set herself against what F. O. Matthiessen calls "the possibilities of democracy" invoked by other writers of her age (ix), but at a time when a woman, Victoria, was the queen of En-

gland, Dickinson's royalist language also bears witness to the political irony that it is under an aristocratic order of hereditary and divine right rather than under a democratic order of contract and inalienable rights that a woman was entitled to political power and to rule.

Considered within the context of their social moment, at a time when the old rhythms of gentry and rural life were being disrupted by rapid transformations in the socioeconomic landscape of nineteenth-century America, even Dickinson poems that seem most resistant to a historical, and specifically class, reading begin to assume a more than merely personal resonance.¹⁴ The strongly elegiac tone of Dickinson's verse and her constant return to the subjects of time, change, loss, mortality, and death, represent a response not only to the death of this or that person, but to change itself as the overwhelming social and economic fact, even in rural Amherst.

In Dickinson's poems, the garden as a site of social abundance is continually threatened by the leveling forces of time, change, and democratic death. In the poem "A loss of something ever felt I—" the poet articulates her sense of loss in explicitly social terms. "As one bemoaning a Dominion / Itself the only Prince cast out—" she experiences her bereavement as the loss of an entire way of social being associated with an aristocratic and essentially monarchical past. Exiled and "cast out" of her princely heritage, she longs for a restoration of her lost rank and estate, signified in the poem by her "Delinquent Palaces" (#959). Even in poems of seemingly "pure" imagination, such as "There is a morn by men unseen" or "I taste a liquor never brewed," the poet expresses her desire to retreat from social time into some "remoter green" of ease and stability protected from historical change. Thus, in the poem "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" the "finer Forge" within becomes a way of securing the speaker against the fact that real forges and real blacksmiths were being dispossessed as the country came increasingly under the control of money, markets, and what Dickinson called "the Mighty Merchant" (#365).

As if in response to the increasing valuation placed on money and material possessions as opposed to ascribed status in the new marketplace economy, Dickinson's poems return almost obsessively to the problem of money, or rather, the poet's lack of it. During the depression of 1856–57, the *Hampshire and Franklin Express* commented on the plan to bring a good lecturer to Amherst every few weeks: "A half dozen of our young men, determined upon varying the monotony of the hard times by something that should remind us that we have minds

and tastes too as well as pockets, formed themselves into a club, pledging each other for a first class lecture here as often as once a fortnight" (Leyda 1: 350). The cultural note suggests an underlying strategy of Dickinson's work. Whereas Edward Dickinson sought to secure his social position through the acquisition of more money and more land, Dickinson sought to secure the declining status of both her gender and her class through the accumulation of cultural and spiritual capital, what she called "My Soul's *entire income*" (#270). Over and over again, Dickinson's poems assert the ultimate and real value of an interior, mental, and spiritual economy against the instability of the new marketplace economy of wages, prices, contracts, merchants, securities, stocks, and reversals. "Reverse cannot befall / That fine Prosperity / Whose Sources are interior—" the poet says, setting an inner "Prosperity" against the "Adversity" and "Misfortune" of an international marketplace dependent on the happenings "In far—Bolivian Ground—" (#395). Similarly, in the poem "Some—Work for Immortality— / The Chiefter part, for Time—" the immediate compensation of the marketplace, "The Bullion of Today—," is set against the cultural and spiritual "Work" of the poet as the "Currency / Of immortality": "One's—Money—One's—the Mine," she says (#406).

In a lithograph of Amherst dated 1886, two hat factories and a train appear in the foreground and the Homestead and the Evergreens appear in the background in a pictorial representation that sets rural past against industrial future, figuring how an older order of landed wealth, rank, and privilege was giving way to a new economic order of industry, entrepreneurs, and money as the ultimate measure of distinction and value (Fig. 3). Read within the context of the declining status of her social class, Dickinson's poems might be said to represent that historical moment when the values of an old aristocracy of established rank and power were being translated from the public and political to the literary and artistic realm, forming a kind of new cultural aristocracy. For Dickinson, as for the club of young men who determined to bring "first class" lecturers to Amherst during the depression of 1856–57, "mind and taste" became a means of compensating for the real losses of the "pocket," as a new cultural elite sought to perpetuate the values of stability, order, and degree against the debased imperatives of commercial marketplace and democratic masses.

Dickinson's refusal to publish was marked by a similar aristocratic resistance to the twin forces of democratization and commercialization. In 1843, a reviewer for the prestigious, Whig-oriented *North American Review* expressed anxiety about the

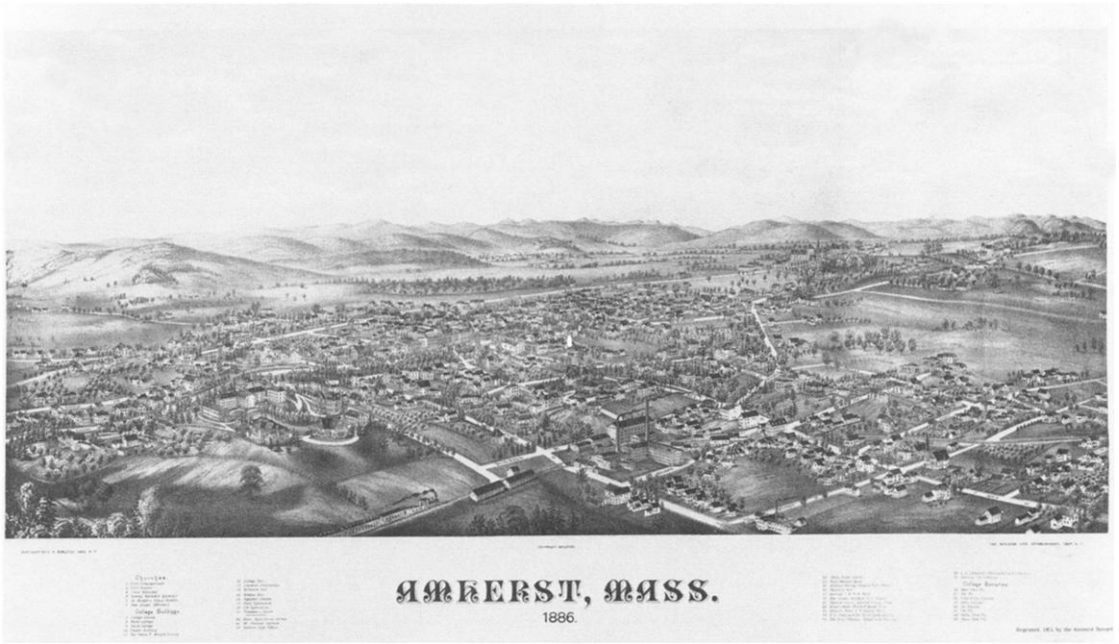


Fig. 3. 1886 lithograph of Amherst, with hat factories and train in foreground and the Dickinson homestead and the Evergreens just behind factories. (The Jones Library Special Collections, Amherst, MA.)

increasing commercialization and democratization of literature as the written word and authorship itself became subject to the laws of a marketplace economy. “Literature begins to assume the aspect and undergo the mutations of trade,” he noted. “The author’s profession is becoming as mechanical as that of the printer and the bookseller, being created by the same causes and subject to the same laws. The nature of the supply seems likely to be as strictly proportioned to the demand, as in any other commercial operation” (“The Works of Alexander Dumas”).

In “Myself was formed—a Carpenter—,” Dickinson registers a similar anxiety about the literary marketplace. At a time when the traditional artisan economy of craft and handwork was being reduced to wage labor, Dickinson imagines herself as an artisan whose craft is under siege by the marketplace values of speed, cost, and efficiency:

Myself was formed—a Carpenter—
An unpretending time
My Plane—and I, together wrought
Before a Builder came—

To measure our attainments—
Had we the Art of Boards

Sufficiently developed—He'd hire us
At Halves— (#488)

Representing herself as a Christ-like figure, Dickinson responds “Against the Man” that she is engaged in another, more immortal kind of work: “We—Temples build—I said—.”

Dickinson offered a similar response “Against the Man” in refusing to let her “Mind” be published and put to “use” by the male publishing world. In 1862, she wrote to Thomas Higginson: “Two Editors of Journals came to my Father’s House, this winter—and asked me for my Mind—and when I asked them ‘Why,’ they said I was penurious—and they, would *use it for the World—*” (*Letters* 2: 404; emphasis added).¹⁵ The terms of Dickinson’s refusal to publish are inscribed in poem #709:

Publication—is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man—
Poverty—be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly—but We—would rather
From Our Garret go
White—Unto the White Creator—
Than invest—Our Snow—

Deploying a highly charged political language in which the rhetoric of antislavery protest intersects with the rhetoric of protest against wage labor as a new form of human enslavement, Dickinson pleads against the “Auction” block of commercial publication: “Reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price—.”

When in 1872, Dickinson was approached by a “Miss P” (perhaps Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, the editor of the *Women’s Journal* and author of *The Gates Ajar* [1868], a popular novel that materialized heaven as a middle-class, female-centered household complete with pianos), she responded with an irony that verged on hostility. “Of Miss P—I know but this, dear,” she wrote her cousin Louise Norcross. “She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my chirrup more. Perhaps she stated it as my duty, I don’t distinctly remember, and always burn such letters, so I cannot obtain it now. I replied declining. She did not write to me again—she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch . . .” (*Letters* 2: 500).

Dickinson explicitly mocks and, in effect, “burns up” the

middle-class notion of women's writing as an extension of women's domestic role—the missionary idea that it is her “duty” to “aid the world by my chirrup more.” Her choice of *chirrup* underlines the trivialization of women's songs and puns on the literary domestic notion that it is the woman writer's role to “cheer-up” the world rather than, in Dickinson's terms, to make it “see” complexly, oppositely, and at times somberly. She also takes a parting shot at women reformers, aimed perhaps at Miss P[helps]'s involvement in temperance reform and the work of “extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch. . . .”

In her own writing Dickinson appears to have been more interested in being immortal than in being merely useful, helpful, dutiful, or moral. Adhering to an essentially aristocratic and Carlylean notion of literature as the production of mind and genius for eternity, she set herself against not only the new commercialization and democratization but against the sentimental women writers of her time who had gained money and fame in the American marketplace. At a time when the traditionally productive space of the home and traditional female housework were being devalued, Dickinson also appears to have been engaged in reclaiming the home and women as producers of valuable and enduring work. Sometime in the late fifties she began arranging and sewing her poems into groupings that Mabel Loomis Todd called “fascicles.” Among Dickinson's manuscripts, there are 39 groupings that have been threaded and bound together and 25 other groupings that have not been sewn. Although Dickinson may have been preparing her poems for eventual publication, her attitude toward the literary marketplace makes it more likely that she was engaged in a private form of publication.

Folding, sewing, and binding four to five sheets of paper together in groupings of eighteen to twenty poems, Dickinson, in effect, converted traditional female thread and needle work into a different kind of housework and her own form of productive industry. She appears to have been engaged in a kind of home or cottage industry, a precapitalist mode of manuscript production and circulation that avoided the commodity and use values of the commercial marketplace. Along with the manuscripts that she produced, threaded, and bound herself, Dickinson also engaged in a private, essentially aristocratic form of “publication” by enclosing and circulating her poems in letters to her friends. The irony, of course, is that while Dickinson contested the values of the capitalist marketplace in her life and work, by retreating from historical time and social represen-

tation toward writing as a subjective, private, and aestheticized act, she, like other Romantic poets, ended by enforcing the separation of art and society and the corresponding feminization, trivialization, and marginalization of art in the new bourgeois aesthetics.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that upper-class women “were denied the economic, social, and psychological status ordinarily essential to creativity” and “denied the right, skill, and education to tell their own stories with confidence” (71). I have been suggesting that, on the contrary, it was precisely Dickinson’s upper-class economic, social, and psychological status that enabled in fundamental ways her poetic creation and the seeming radicalism of her vision. If Dickinson challenged the masculine orders of authority in home and family, church and state, it was an assault launched from within the confines and class privilege of her “Father’s house.” If from the point of view of gender her refusal to marry, to publish, and to circulate might be read as a radical act, from the point of view of class that refusal was paradoxically grounded in the privilege of her status as the daughter of a conservative Whig squire. In fact, Dickinson’s decision not to marry was underwritten by her father, whose reluctance to have his daughters leave his house may well have been related to a desire to keep family and class position intact against the potentially corrosive—and democratizing—influences of the time. It was because Dickinson had the economic privilege to choose to stay at home that she could finally refuse to go to market. “Poverty—be justifying / For so foul a thing / Possibly,” she wrote in “Publication—is the Auction,” apparently oblivious to the fact that other writers, including her friend Helen Hunt Jackson, really did have to write and to publish for money and survival.

At about the same time Dickinson began writing her poems, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 was calling upon women to organize for women’s rights, women’s suffrage, and real political power; Margaret Fuller was enjoining women to redeem the lost political ideals of America and pay for what she called “Isabella’s jewels” in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845); and other women writers, including most notably Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs, were celebrating the networks among black and white women as a powerful means of subverting and contesting the slave system. Although Dickinson’s recognition of the oppression she shared with other women had the effect of politicizing that experience, the bonds

of assistance and resistance she formed with her women friends lacked any larger political reference. She never conceived of taking her struggle into the public sphere.

"If women have a role to play," says Julia Kristeva in "Oscillation between Power and Denial," "it is only in assuming a *negative* function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary movements" (166). If Dickinson was on the side of revolution, for her, as for Kristeva, it was a revolution located not in the political and economic but in the linguistic sphere. Like Kristeva and other French feminists, including Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Dickinson showed little concern with politically transforming the material conditions of women's lives. Her revolution was enacted on the level of language by rupturing "everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning" and thus challenging a meta-physical order and an entire way of knowing and signifying grounded in the transcendent power of the Word as Logos and Father.

Insofar as language is the symbolic structure that constitutes the social order, Dickinson's disruption of language and syntax might, as Kristeva suggests in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, register or anticipate a revolutionary transformation in the political sphere. But while Dickinson's poetic assault on the patriarchal orders of language parallels the more public agitation for a change in woman's social, economic, and legal status in the US, it is unclear how her poetic revolution might become an agent of political change. As Catherine Clément notes in *The Newly Born Woman*, in a comment on the distinction between Hélène Cixous's notion that language can be a vehicle of historical transformation through the writing of female desire and a more traditional Marxist notion of language and history as seemingly different realms of struggle: "There is imagination, desire, creation, production of writing . . . and then somewhere else, on another level of reality, there is class struggle, and within it, women's struggle. There are missing links in all that, which we should try to think in order to succeed in joining our two languages" (Cixous and Clément 159).

The "missing links" between Dickinson's revolutionary poetics and the revolutionary struggles of blacks, women, and workers that marked her time suggest a potential problem and contradiction in the current theoretical—and feminist—emphasis on language as the site of political transformation. Not only does Dickinson's revolutionary poetic practice appear to

be unconnected with any real transformation in woman's historical status as object and other in a system of production and exchange controlled by men, but as in the work of James Joyce, Antonin Artaud, and other celebrated modern poetic "revolutionaries," her radical poetics was conjoined with an essentially conservative and in some sense reactionary and Know-Nothing politics. If on the level of language Dickinson might be celebrated as a kind of literary terrorist—a "loaded Gun" and dancing "Bomb"—who blew up the social and symbolic orders of patriarchal language, it is also important that we recognize that her poetic revolution was grounded in the privilege of her class position in a conservative Whig household whose elitist, antidemocratic values were at the very center of her work.

Notes

1. For the debate between Marxists and feminists about class and gender as categories of analysis, see, for example, Robinson; MacKinnon; Moi; Lentricchia; and Gilbert and Gubar, "The Man on the Dump."
2. This ahistoricism in Dickinson studies is by no means limited to feminist critics. Commenting on the underlying vision of Dickinson's work in *Emily Dickinson*, Richard Chase observes: "Emily Dickinson's eschatological cast of mind, on the whole a departure from New England Puritanism, was entirely a personal vision of life and has no direct historical or social implications" (186). In *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David Reynolds argues that it is precisely in transcending politics that Dickinson becomes a major woman artist (387–437).
3. Ideology, writes Terry Eagleton, is "that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as 'natural', or not seen at all" (5).
4. Feminists are less certain about the relation and relevance of class in the history of women. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are dispersed among men and divided from other women along class lines: "If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women" (xix). In *Sexual Politics*, on the other hand, Kate Millett rejects class altogether as a significant category of analysis, arguing that patriarchy is the fundamental system of domination, independent of capitalism or any other mode of production. Whereas American feminist historians, most notably Gerda Lerner and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, have tended to follow de Beauvoir in emphasizing the class and race divisions among women in the US, American feminist literary critics have tended to follow Millett in emphasizing the communality of interests among women across race, class, and cultural bounds.

5. For a study of New England squirearchy, see Gross.
6. For an opposing view of class, see Pessen, *Jacksonian America and Riches, Class, and Power*. He argues that far from being an age of equality and "the democratic mixing of upper and lower classes," the antebellum decades featured an inequality among classes that surpassed anything that came afterward.
7. In *History of Amherst College*, William S. Tyler says of Samuel Fowler Dickinson: "His business which was so large as to require all his time and care, suffered from his devotion to the public. He became embarrassed and at length actually poor. And in his poverty he had the additional grief of feeling that his services were forgotten" (121).
8. Edward Dickinson's marriage in 1828 to Emily Norcross, who came from a family of wealthy entrepreneurs who had made much money in land speculation, may itself have been linked with his attempt to secure his social position against the impending losses of his father. For a discussion of the socioeconomic background of the Norcross family, see Bernhard, who notes: "At a time when the Dickinson family fortunes were in jeopardy, the Norcross family resources were secure as a result of Joel [Norcross]'s business acumen" (376).
9. On 20 April 1855, the *Franklin and Hampshire Express* noted under "SALE OF REAL ESTATE": "The elegant place where the late venerable Dea. Mack resided for upwards of twenty years, has been recently sold by his son, Samuel E. Mack, of Cincinnati, to the Hon. Edward Dickinson, whose father, Samuel F. Dickinson, formerly owned the place. Thus has the worthy son of an honored sire the pleasure of possessing the 'Old Homestead'" (Leyda 1: 331). How Edward Dickinson obtained the money to repurchase the "Old Homestead" is open to question. His wife, Emily Norcross Dickinson, may have received an inheritance from her father's estate. However, Barton Levi St. Armand and Cynthia Griffin Wolff both argue that Edward Dickinson embezzled from his nieces, Clara and Anna Newman, who came to live with the Dickinson family in the early fifties.
10. For a discussion of the relation between Dickinson and other more socially engaged women writers of her time, see Dobson (78–98).
11. Beecher defended the home as the site of national renewal in such books as *The Duty of American Women to Their Country* (1844). Hale was the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* (1837–77) and the author of several humanitarian works, including the antislavery *Northwood: A Tale of New England* (1827).
12. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser comments on the relation between the state and what he calls "Ideological State Apparatuses" such as the church, the family, the educational system, and the arts. These institutions are, he argues "not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often bitter class struggle" because "the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time" and because "the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there" (147).

13. For a discussion of the "country party" tradition as it was embodied in such figures as John Quincy Adams, see Howe and Thornton.
14. In *The Decline of American Gentry*, Stow Persons argues that "the destruction of gentry leadership and the emergence of a mass society in which powers were dispersed to a degree hitherto unknown constituted perhaps the greatest social transformation in American history" (4).
15. The two editors to whom Dickinson refers may be Samuel Bowles and Josiah Holland, the editors of the *Springfield Republican*.

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