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"Hamlet Wavered for All of Us": Notes on Emily Dickinson as a Reader of Shakespeare

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In New England, Shakespeare's work was welcomed with alternating success. It was censored at first for several reasons: the Puritan law found his stories too sensuous and indecorous and his language was considered foreign to the New World. Even Emerson, despite his wide culture, objected to the fact that his contemporaries should consider Shakespeare immortal, claiming that he embodied a past that needed to be left behind.
If Shakespeare was frowned upon by the supercilious older generations, troubled by his moral and linguistic ambiguity, Emily Dickinson and her young contemporaries devotedly admired his work and read about it. The environment Emily Dickinson grew up in refined her taste vis-à-vis her readings and led her to an idea of drama as a possible and less intimidating double for real life. Drawing on hidden and more overt allusions, this essay explores the ways in which Shakespeare's dramatic voice offered her the opportunity of interweaving fancy and daily life, imagination and real events.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Poems, Letters, Allusions to Shakespeare, Shakespeare in New England

Words and Flowers

Emily Dickinson left nothing but words, and flowers. Her words, her flowers. In the summer of 1877, Emily Dickinson sent a note to Mrs Higginson:

> Dear friend
> I send you a flower from my garden – Though it dies in reaching you, you will know it lived, when it left my hand –

Hamlet wavered for all of us – (L512)[1]

It caught my attention, not only for its fitting reference to Shakespeare's tragic hero, but also because it discloses some relevant features of Emily Dickinson's personality, of her facets and contradictions. From her self-imposed reclusion she writes to the invalid wife of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the man she had always considered her "Preceptor" and with whom she had started a long correspondence a decade earlier. Despite never having met her (and she never would), she reaches out to her enclosing a cape jasmine flower from her garden, although it would inevitably wither in reaching its recipient. Life and death are entangled in this highly laconic (unsigned) note. Was Emily Dickinson underlining, as she did throughout her life, the relevance of Shakespeare's work for her and her contemporaries ("all of us"), or was she identifying with Hamlet's figure and his tragedy? Perhaps the answer is both.

Discovering Emily Dickinson

As she lived, Emily Dickinson had already composed most part of her poetic production by 1877: almost two thousand poems, most of which she meticulously collected herself in hand-sewn booklets ('fascicles') and hid in her desk. They were hermetic, complex poems deemed by many as "confessional", or autobiographical, and as drawing on sixteenth-century metaphysical poetry. To many more her poems seemed beyond any possible interpretation. Then as today, critics could only speculate on what was hiding behind those minimal *ante litteram* Imagist compositions. They are not sonnets, that we know for sure. They are not hymns. They are not psalms. Certainly she did look at the three genres and drew upon their large production. Her meter is generally a four-line stanza with metrical experiments in nearly every one of them.

Despite the complexity of their formal structure, if compared to the poetry I was acquainted with, when I first read them as a young

[1] Emily Dickinson's letters used throughout the text will be quoted from Dickinson 1958 and referred to by number.

student, I was struck by the unique, dramatic juxtaposition of subjects and lyrical motifs:

> Escape is such a thankful Word
> I often in the Night
> Consider it unto myself
> No spectacle in sight
>
> Escape – it is the Basket
> In which the Heart is caught
> When down some awful Battlement
> The rest of Life is drop –
>
> 'Tis not to sight the savior –
> It is to be the saved –
> And that is why I lay my Head
> Upon this trusty word – (no. 1347)[2]

"To escape", "to die", "to forget": Emily Dickinson 'adjusted' her life to the semantic areas related to these verbs, or rather she chose to cope with them. Apparently, they haunted her imagination and imagery, hence most of her poems sounded as precious as music to her. She was highly unpredictable both in her private and sentimental life, not to mention her writings, which were unlike any school of poetry, either Romantic or Transcendental, that she knew of but decided to ignore.

Jeune fille bien rangée, she was brought up in a well-off milieu, but like the "thief" in her poems (inspired by Mr and Mrs Browning's *Dramatis Personae*, she liked to disguise behind a variety of masks) she would sneak books and magazines from her father's library. She had knowledge of the Civil War end, the Gold Rush, of English poetical diction, as well as physics and medicine, but she was in love with words and the imagery she borrowed from Shakespeare, the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and metaphysical poetry. So she shaped a world nobody could break into. A world of words that were precious to her, and certainly a world of poems

[2] Emily Dickinson's poems used throughout the text will be quoted from Dickinson 1955 and referred to by first line and number.

and letters (no diary was ever found[3]), a world where the apparently fragile girl, and then woman, confronted the very concept of identity. A daring choice for her years. Her own identity: silent and proud. Ironic, self-ironic, and aggressive (like "a Loaded Gun" as in "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun", no. 754) in opposition to the ambiguities of the fake middle class that surrounded her, whose members could not come to terms (with the exception of Walt Whitman) with the concepts of solitude and identity. It took decades for her poems to be discovered, before modern poetry (and Freud) realized what she did not know she knew, but she knew:

> Soto! Explore thyself!
> Therein thyself shalt find
> The "Undiscovered Continent" –
> No Settler had the Mind. (no. 832)

As she lived, her poems remained unpublished.

In 1862, Emily Dickinson withdrew from social life. She isolated in the world she had built for herself, where she kept busy reading books, magazines, and newspapers, and writing: writing pages she would edit herself, scribbling on any paper scrap she had at hand, poems and letters, some of which she never mailed.

In that same year she wrote the first letter to T. W. Higginson, who was the editor of the magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. She wrote to him asking for his guidance, inspired by his "Letter to a Young Contributor", the lead article for the April 1862 issue, where he invited beginning writers, young gentlemen *or* young ladies, to send in their work to be reviewed, and eventually published. She never suspected that, though he firmly refused to publish her poems as she lived, he would actually later read them to his intellectual circles in Boston and Cambridge and would be her first editor after her death.

Emily's first letter to Higginson, dated 15 April 1862, sounded (deliberately) affected and even beseeching. For the first time she

[3] Following Emily's instructions, after her death, her sister Lavinia presumably destroyed all her diaries along with most written material she found in her room other than her *poems*.

was unveiling her private compositions to a potential publisher, and in seeking an audience she dared to appear extravagant, closing her note with one of her many Shakespearean quotes:

> 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* [sic] *own pawn*[4] – (L260, emphasis mine)

With the above (unsigned) letter Emily Dickinson enclosed a card on which she wrote her name and attached four poems: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (no. 216), "The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized" (no. 319), "We play at Paste" (no. 320), and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" (no. 318), which Higginson labeled "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled", deeming them too crude and too distant from the conventional Romantic poetry her contemporaries could accept and appreciate.

Unscathed by his criticism, she replied to him a few months later (7 June 1862):

> Dear friend.
> Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before – Domingo comes but once – yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue –
> […]

[4] Quote from *Richard II*, "mine honour's pawn" (I.i.74), and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, "her honour's pawn" (I.iii.47). All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Shakespeare 2005.

> Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, *swung* […]. Your first – gave no dishonor, because the True – are not ashamed – […] Perhaps the Balm, seemed better, because you bled me, first.
> […]
> If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase – and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me – then – my Barefoot-Rank is better –
> You think my gait "*spasmodic*" – I am in danger – Sir –
> You think me "*uncontrolled*" – I have no Tribunal.
> Would you have time to be the "friend" you should think I need? I have a little shape – it would not crowd your Desk – nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries –
> […]
> The "hand you stretch me in the Dark", I put mine in, and turn away – *I have no Saxon*, now –
> […]
> But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson? (L265, emphasis mine)

This time she did sign it "Your friend / E Dickinson –".

Her brother Austin, who knew her best, confirmed that Emily was 'posing' as a naive young woman writer, longing for guidance to get her potential career as a poet started. Higginson did intervene, not by publishing any of the poems she enclosed, but by prompting her to 'adjust' her verses by adding titles and more rhymes, to make it 'more orderly' – which (given her temper) she ignored to do, but she did carry on her correspondence with him.

It was Higginson himself who eventually provided the titles, after Emily's death, when he co-edited with Mabel Loomis Todd[5], Austin's mistress, the fragments of the letters and poems she had left behind in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published for the first time in 1890, and subsequently in 1891 and 1896. So did Emily's

[5] After Emily's death, with Austin's permission, Mabel Loomis Todd began sorting through Emily's papers, transcribing them: letter scraps, scribbled pages, and unsent messages. Later she would also contact Emily's friends, relatives, and acquaintances to collect the letters sent by Emily in her lifetime, through Lavinia, who used to mail them for her. Some of the recipients sent the letters back, others transcribed them, some refused to disclose their content. She published her transcriptions in *Letters of Emily Dickinson* in 1894 (Dickinson 1894). What about those transcriptions? Were they faithful to the originals? Were any letters accidentally lost, or perhaps purposely burnt?

closest, life-time friend and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, who jealously kept the poems and letters in her possession (more than two hundred and seventy-six known poems Emily sent or personally delivered to her through the little path that connected the Homestead and the Evergreens), maintaining till the very end that she was the only one who had the right to publish them. She never did, it was ultimately her daughter who edited and published them a few years later, in 1925.

Hence, Emily Dickinson's poems were first published altering her peculiar punctuation, adding new rhymes and periods, eliminating dashes, and substituting capital letters, forcing her work into a more subdued replica of contemporary poetry, such as Frances Sargent Osgood's or Helen Hunt Jackson's.

Oddly enough, none of the first editors seemed to consider that capital letters were used regularly by both Shakespeare and metaphysical poets.

To many Emily Dickinson's poems appeared "strange" – or at least so they were to her contemporary American readers, who were not familiar with medieval and Renaissance English expressions such as (and I am choosing at random among Shakespeare's and Donne's sonnets): "thou" for "you", "dos't" for "does", "phantom" for "ghost", "shalt" for "shall", "hath" for "has", "gaus't" for "gave". Or, with the way Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the metaphysical poets used to spell: "doth" for "does", "thine" for "your", "pow'r" for "power", "nought" for "nothing", "addeth" for "add", "brethren" for "brother". Moreover, they were filled with literary allusions and quotes that were certainly not easy to decipher. One wonders how many of her contemporary authors would have written in a poem:

> Where Thou art – that – is Home –
> Cashmere – or Calvary – the same –
> Degree – or Shame –
> I scarce esteem Location's Name –
> So I may Come –
>
> What Thou dost – is Delight –
> Bondage as Play – be sweet –
> Imprisonment – Content –

And Sentence – Sacrament –
Just We two – meet –

Where Thou art not – is Wo –
Tho' Bands of Spices – row –
What Thou dost not – Despair –
Tho' Gabriel – praise me – Sir (no. 725)

Not only were the subjects of her poems hard to decode, for the most part, but their form was quite unusual. Besides the absence of rhyme, they were also generally quite short, and the lines ended with a dash, a very unusual habit in nineteenth-century poetry. Many times she used them to stress the relevance of a specific lexeme, although she certainly knew when to use quotation marks, as in:

The Heart has many Doors –
I can but knock –
For any sweet "Come in"
Impelled to hark –
Not saddened by repulse,
Repast to me
That somewhere, there exists,
Supremacy – (no. 1567)

She seems to ask her readers not to put an 'end' to their reading, inducing them to take a 'break', to pause or linger on the very last line, or to return to its very beginning. After all isn't this what poetry is? A suggestion to be pondered.

Since Higginson's preface to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1890, where he presented them as "flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life", Emily Dickinson was 'doomed' to be the poet of "Life, Nature, Love, Time, Eternity" for some decades. It is a fact that when she edited *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* published by Little, Brown & Company (Boston), her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi still presented her aunt as a "romantic" poet, who wondered about the "relationship" between time and eternity, time *versus* eternity. Dickinson Bianchi did not provide a preface to her collection, nor a description to support her

perspective. She seemed to – and probably did – forget what Higginson had written, asking Dickinson's readers to go beyond her apparently "romantic" approach to life and poetry. Conversely, in 1945, Mabel Loomis Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham wisely included Higginson's preface in her precious publication *Ancestors' Brocades*:

> This selection from her poems is published to meet the desire of her personal friends, and especially of her surviving sister. It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found – flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame. They are here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes; although it is fair to say that the titles have been assigned, almost invariably, by the editors. (Bingham 1945a, 416-17)

After refusing to publish Dickinson's work during her lifetime, four years after her death Higginson finally recognized her genius behind her "insight into nature and life". Though few of Emily Dickinson's critics (very few) ever liked his approach to her poetry, he was among the first to introduce it to the public. In his first preface, he cared to inform her readers that her poems had no title and were charged with "an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power", and that when touched upon by her, a "shipwreck" had nothing to do with an Ancient Mariner's ballad, but rather with a "mental conflict" (417):

> […] we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. (417)

Higginson's highly effective, and one would dare say 'poetic', words in describing Emily's lines as "poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them" (417) sound like something she might have wished could have been written about her verse. What he once deemed too 'rough' to be published had eventually turned into and "uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable".

Mabel Loomis Todd's preface to the second edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* gave readers and editors to come some key directions to follow:

> As a rule, the verses were without titles; but "A Country Burial", "A Thunder-Storm", "The Humming-Bird", and a few others were named by their author, frequently at the end – sometimes only in the accompanying note, if sent to a friend.
> The variation of readings, with the fact that she often wrote in pencil and not always clearly, have at times thrown a good deal of responsibility upon her Editors. But all interference not absolutely inevitable has been avoided. The very roughness of her own rendering is part of herself, and not lightly to be touched; for it seems in many cases that she intentionally avoided the smoother and more usual rhymes.
> […] [T]he very absence of conventional form challenges attention. In Emily Dickinson's exacting hands, the especial, intrinsic fitness of a particular order of words might not be sacrificed to anything virtually extrinsic; and her verses all show a strange cadence of inner rhythmical music […] – appealing, indeed, to an unrecognized sense more elusive than hearing. (419)

Millicent Todd Bingham also included her mother's preface in the above mentioned *Ancestors' Brocades* where she recounts her mother's heartfelt involvement in collecting, editing, and publishing Emily Dickinson's work. A precious publication indeed, as it shed a new light on Emily Dickinson's mysterious figure and offered a fresh perspective on her work. After her mother's death, she was allowed to read and transcribe passages from her mother's journals and diaries, along with the yet unpublished manuscripts her mother had locked in a camphor-wood chest, which she collected in *Bolts of Melody* published that same year:

> Most of them were smothered with alternative words and phrases crowded into every available space – around the edges, upside down, wedged between the lines. (Bingham 1945b, xii)

Ancestors' Brocades follows a philological approach, through which Mabel Loomis Todd's daughter discloses how Emily literally abandoned her poems and letters in the hands of her future editors.

> Emily placed a great responsibility upon her editors by leaving to them so often the choice of a key word. For it authorized them to color her thought with their taste. […] [T]hey might be tempted to go further, to *change* a word to fit their own preference – a dangerous leeway, for the thought is timeless while taste may change. […]
> […] Emily's habits with regard to punctuation were individual to say the least. The editors decided that her way of beginning important words with capitals would not convey in print the nuance of emphasis intended. Capitals must be used sparingly if at all. Another pet device, that of underscoring for emphasis, would look exaggerated as italics on the printed page. Superfluous quotation marks, too, were scattered through the poems. Were they intended as guideposts, the editors questioned, if the strangeness of a word was considered too shocking? Or did Emily use them because she wanted to reassure the reader that she meant what she said? (Bingham 1945a, 38-39)

Hence, with some controversy and taking a few editorial liberties, four women probed into and shaped Emily Dickinson's work according to the roles they had in her life: her brother's 'other woman' Mabel and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham, her brother's wife Susan and her daughter Martha Dickinson Bianchi. The former two trying to keep her writings the way they were, faithfully transcribing them, the latter two trying to stress the relevance of Emily's relationship with her sister-in-law.

Millicent revealed how laborious the exchange of letters and opinions between Emily's editors, publishers, and critics had been, so that her work could finally be known to her contemporary and future readers.

Susan, so that no one would forget that she was the closest to Emily, also authored her obituary in the *Springfield Republican*:

> One can only speak of "duties beautifully done": of her gentle tillage of rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into a heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her subtle chemistries; of her tenderness to all in the home circle; her gentlewoman's grace and courtesy to all […]. Like a magician she caught the shadowy apparitions of her brain and tossed them in startling picturesqueness to her friends, who, charmed with their simplicity and homeliness as well as profundity, fretted that she had so easily made palpable the tantalizing fancies forever eluding their bungling, fettered grasp. So intimate and passionate was her love of Nature, she seemed herself part of the high March sky, the summer day and bird-call. Keen and eclectic in her literary tastes she sifted libraries to Shakespeare and Browning; quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words by which she must make her revelation. To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formalized faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer. How better note the flight of this "*soul of fire in a shell of pearl*" than by her own words? –
> Morns like these, we parted;
> Noons like these, she rose;
> Fluttering first, then firmer,
> To her fair repose. (Dickinson 1998, 266-68, emphasis mine)

She obviously described Emily Dickinson as she knew her, offering a concise and splendid image of what she was to her. The image of a "soul of fire in a shell of pearl" is something that Dickinson never used to describe herself, but the image of the pearl often appeared in her poems, (directly or indirectly) echoing Shakespeare's Ariel and his "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (*The Tempest*, I.ii.401):

> Best Things dwell out of Sight
> The Pearl – the Just – Our Thought.
>
> Most shun the Public Air
> Legitimate, and Rare –
>
> The Capsule of the Wind

The Capsule of the Mind

Exhibit here, as doth a Burr –
Germ's Germ be where? (no. 998)

Ultimately, fame did belong to Emily, and to her words. And through her words, there she was: as in a blurred daguerreotype, Emily Dickinson began to acquire a shape and a physiognomy, until she finally and legitimately became one of the most famous poets of nineteenth-century American literature, along with Walt Whitman.

As she lived, mystery and gossip surrounded her life. She was already a myth in Amherst, at least to the eyes of her acquaintances and family, as Mabel Loomis Todd once described her in her journal (15 September 1882):

> Emily is called in Amherst "the myth". She has not been out of her house for fifteen years. […] She writes the strangest poems, & very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius. She wears always white, & has her hair arranged as was the fashion fifteen years ago when she went into retirement. She wanted me to come & sing to her, but she would not see me. She has frequently sent me flowers & poems, & we have a very pleasant friendship in that way. (Quoted in Sewall 1980, 217)

She was an apparently fragile woman. She seemed discreet and shy, but was resolute enough to live in solitude, as Mabel Loomis Todd would point out in her introduction to the second publication of Emily's poems in 1891: "She had tried society and the world, and found them lacking" (Bingham 1945a, 419).

Kinsmen of the Shelf: Shakespeare in Amherst

Unto my Books – so good to turn –
Far ends of tired Days –
It half endears the Abstinence –
And Pain – is missed – in Praise –

As Flavors – cheer Retarded Guests
With Banquettings to be –

So Spices – stimulate the time
Till my small Library –

It may be Wilderness – without –
Far feet of failing Men –
But Holiday – excludes the night –
And it is Bells – within –

I thank these Kinsmen of the Shelf –
Their Countenances Kid
Enamor – in Prospective –
And satisfy – obtained – (no. 604)

The Homestead where Emily grew up had a well-stocked library that inspired her readings and discussions with relatives, friends, and tutors. Most of the volumes, along with the publications of her poems and letters, are now part of the Emily Dickinson Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard. From Chaucer to contemporary authors, the Old and New Testaments (one edition dated 1843 she received as a gift from her father when she was fourteen years old). And then Cervantes, Romantic literature, metaphysical poets, Dickens, Emerson, William G. Howells, Henry James (the installments published in *The Atlantic Monthly* of *The Europeans*), Keats, and, among her contemporaries, Longfellow and Tennyson. In addition to the Bibles, some other religious texts, such as *Christian Believing and Living* by F. D. Huntington.

Certainly, alongside the scriptural passages from the Old Testament she surely perused *The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare* (1840) edited by Charles Knight, a collection of paintings and drawings, screen printings, which her father had bought to keep in the family library. She was welcomed to look at them and she certainly found inspiration in them. It is by no coincidence that some of the characters (one amongst many, Puck) she mentions in her writing seem a literary version of the iconographic ones pictured in one of Knight's volumes. One of the volumes shows several markings and loose pages that suggest it must have been often used in the Dickinson household.

To the family library one must add Emily's school books, the texts she worked on and studied while attending Mount Holyoke

College. Among others: *The Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1832) by Archibald Alexander; *Elements of History, Ancient and Modern* (1828) by Joseph Emerson Worcester; *Catalogue of Plants Growing without Cultivation in the Vicinity of Amherst* (1829) by Edward Hitchcock; *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (1827) by Samuel Phillips Newman; *A Class-book to Botany* (1851) by Alphonso Wood, and, last but not least, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Conscious of the extensiveness of the reading material she could approach in her family library, in April 1862 she wrote to Higginson:

> I had a terror – since September – I could tell to none – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – You inquire my Books – For Poets – I have Keats – and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose – Mr Ruskin – Sir Thomas Browne – and the Revelations. I went to school – but in your manner of the phrase – had no education. When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality – but venturing too near, himself – he never returned – Soon after, my Tutor, died – and for several years, my Lexicon – was my only companion – (L261)

Though she omits Shakespeare here, who was clearly one of her masters, she categorizes books and fear on the same level, revealing that her lexicon was her companion, the precious glossary that would help her go through the day. Being reading and writing a way to overcome fear and solitude. What about her terror? What was it?

She once admitted to her close family friend Joseph Bardwell Lyman that writing would save her:

> We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I don't know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at *his outlines till he glows as no sapphire*. (Quoted in Sewall 1980, 675, emphasis mine)

Sometimes she calls words an empty space: a "gap" to be filled, an "abyss", as in "To fill a Gap" (no. 546). She feels danger ("Peril

as a Possession", no. 1678), despair ("It was not Death, for I stood up", no. 510). She herself seeks fear and loneliness, as she clearly states in the poem "The Loneliness One dare not sound" (no. 777):

> The Loneliness One dare not sound –
> And would as soon surmise
> As in its Grave go plumbing
> To ascertain the size –
>
> The Loneliness whose worst alarm
> Is lest itself should see –
> And perish from before itself
> For just a scrutiny –
>
> The Horror not be surveyed –
> But skirted in the Dark –
> With Consciousness suspended –
> And Being under Lock –
>
> I fear me this – is Loneliness –
> The Maker of the soul
> Its Caverns and its Corridors
> Illuminate – or seal –

Words complemented her. Emily had to write so that her words could flow into music, cancel mourning, melt into the whispering of the wind, opening up to alarming appearances, as in "Conscious am I in my Chamber" (no. 679).

She had to write to embody and define a solitude enhanced by silence:

> The words the happy say
> Are paltry melody
> But those the silent feel
> Are beautiful – (no. 1750)

She had to write so that words could bring to the surface of language the very paradoxes and contradictions that remain concealed in speech and that the act of digging into the single word could unveil:

> A word is dead
> When it is said,
> Some say.
> I say it just
> Begins to live
> That day. (no. 1212)

After being treated for an eye problem in 1865, she wrote to J. B. Lyman to share her joy, for she could read her beloved books again, and one author in particular:

> How my blood bounded! Shakespear [sic] was the first; Antony & Cleopatra where Enobarbus laments the amorous lapse of his master. Here is the ring of it.
> "heart that in the scuffles of
> great fights hath burst the
> buck[l]e on his breast"
> then I thought why clasp any hand but this. Give me ever to drink of this wine. Going home I flew to the shelves and devoured the luscious passages. I thought I should tear the leaves out as I turned them. Then I settled down to a willingness for all the rest to go but William Shakespear [sic]. Why need we Joseph read anything else but him. (Sewall 1965, 76)

Some years later (about 1873), in a letter to F. B. Sanborn, an acquaintance of hers, she wrote about her strong bond with books and her predilection for Shakespeare:

> I am glad there are Books.
> They are better than Heaven for that is unavoidable while one may miss these.
> Had I a trait you would accept I should be most proud, though he has had his Future who has found Shakespeare – (L402)

In New England, Shakespeare's work had been welcomed with alternating success. It was censored at first for several reasons: the Puritan law found his stories too sensuous and indecorous and his language was considered foreign to the New World. Even Emerson, despite his wide culture, objected to the fact that his

contemporaries should consider Shakespeare immortal, claiming that he embodied a past that needed to be left behind.

However, if Shakespeare was frowned upon by the supercilious older generations, troubled by his moral and linguistic ambiguity (puns and wits were dangerous ways of playing with words), Emily and her young contemporaries devotedly admired his work and read about it. Even her beloved women poets could not compare to "the Master" whom she referred and paid tribute to in her writing, borrowing from him what could suit her poetry and enrich her letters.

In a November 1871 letter to Higginson, she praised women poets, but even her favorite writers were minuscule compared to the Master:

> Mrs Hunt's Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs – Browning, with the exception of Mrs Lewes – but truth like Ancestor's Brocades can stand alone […]. While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm –
> An Insect cannot run away with Achilles' Head. (L368)

Notwithstanding the Puritan New England milieu, the Bard was certainly not a menacing presence in the Dickinson household, and Emily and her siblings were well acquainted with his work. Certainly Austin and Lavinia did not miss the events staged in Boston or the plays at the Boston Museum, a popular theatre on Tremont Street. Shakespeare became more and more the object of society discussions and cultural debates. As the years and the republishing of his plays went on (a similar fate befell Emily Dickinson's poems), Shakespeare's works were eventually associated with an ethical message also suited for young women. Though there is no evidence that Emily ever attended one of Shakespeare's plays with her siblings, we know for sure that she was deeply fascinated by Shakespeare, to the point that, along with a group of fellow students, she had founded a reading club in Amherst where they read his work aloud and discussed the articles that appeared in the local magazines *The Indicator* and *The Amherst College Magazine*. Emily deeply admired him and his work to the point that when the morality of his verse was once questioned, she

refused to read a redacted version stating: "There's nothing wicked in Shakespeare, and if there is I don't want to know it" (Dickinson 1894, 129-30).

Theaters, magazines, and periodicals promoted Shakespeare's work. The lectures on Shakespeare by Richard Henry Dana, Sr. – a brilliant, albeit very conservative, essayist and speaker – were a popular attraction of the time. In 1850, he was in Amherst for a series of his Shakespeare lectures. The first one, titled "The Influence of Literature on Our Characters in Daily Life", was published in Amherst College *Indicator* and focused on the principle that reading poetry would lead to high and eternal truth and that Shakespeare's work would expand "our imagination activity and […] our fancy". In all likelihood, Emily attended the lectures with her family and certainly, being the avid reader that she was, she could not have missed the many articles on Shakespeare that repeatedly appeared in local newspapers and student magazines, such as *The Amherst Student* praising him: "He's ourselves, our lesson, our flesh and blood", or the *Hampshire Franklin Express* that published Dana's talk on "Woman". Nor could she have ignored the above mentioned *Indicator*, which published an essay titled "Shakespeare's Women", presenting Shakespeare's heroines as consistent and trustworthy "models of femininity" and appreciating the fact that there were no "female Hamlets".

Nevertheless, weren't Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cleopatra, like Hamlet, victims of a world they had not been able to come to terms with? Emily liked that. It was a world that needed decoding, which was exactly what Emily did.

The environment Emily Dickinson grew up in refined her taste vis-à-vis her readings and led her to an idea of drama as a possible and less intimidating double for real life. Whose dramatic voice better than Shakespeare's could have offered her the opportunity of interweaving fancy and daily life, imagination and real events?

> We dream – it is good we are dreaming –
> It would hurt us – were we awake –
> But since it is playing – kill us,
> And we are playing – shriek –

What harm? Men die – externally –
It is a truth – of Blood –
But we – are dying in Drama –
And Drama – is never dead –

Cautious – We jar each other –
And either – open the eyes –
Lest the Phantasm – prove the Mistake –
And the livid Surprise

Cool us to Shafts of Granite –
With just an Age – and Name –
And perhaps a phrase in Egyptian –
It's prudenter – to dream – (no. 531)

Though de-codifying allusions to Shakespeare's work might prove a difficult but possible task as far as her letters are concerned, the procedure becomes altogether challenging if one attempts to search in her poems. As if to hide them, she mingled references to Shakespeare's work, with passages from the Book of Revelation, with news from Amherst's daily life, together with her personal reflections. Word after word, she slowly entered that interregnum she deemed consonant with her identity, and with what she suspected was and would be her identity as a woman, and her literary *persona*.

If as a poet, "drama" was her stance, why not select among Shakespeare's characters, the ones she felt closer to? Rebel, dissenter, and isolated as she was, I would suggest to start with the figure of the 'fool' – as in Shakespeare, the privileged recipient of truth.

One of the essays published by *The Indicator* addressed the matter of Hamlet being actually crazy, settling the question as follows: "If its madness was real, it was reasonable, it feigned faultless"[6]. This could shed a light on the question mark closing the poem "The first Day's Night had come" (no. 410):

My Brain – begun to laugh –
I mumbled – like a fool –

[6] See Finnerty 2006, 194.

and tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day –
My Brain keeps giggling – still.

And Something's odd – within –
That person that I was –
And this One – do not feel the same –
Could it be Madness – this?

One could speculate why this very poem was not published until 1947. Were her editors afraid it would disturb her readers' expectations? We know that in the States, nineteenth-century asylums were built not only to confine the 'insane' but in the attempt to free society altogether from all the troublesome, 'difficult' figures. Asylums and jails were meant to preserve a supposedly respectable society.

The rhetorical question mark at the end of the poem echoes the madness of Shakespeare's fools and their way to wisdom: the very wisdom that Hamlet shares in the apparently playful fiction he sets up, behind which his own tragedy, and not only his, hide.

KING CLAUDIUS
Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.
(*Hamlet*, III.i.191)

HAMLET
[L]et those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.
(III.ii.38-45)

Not to mention the exchange between the Fool and King Lear:

FOOL
If a man's brains were in his heels, were't not in danger of kibes?
LEAR
Ay, boy.
FOOL
Then, I prithee, be merry: thy wit shall ne'er go slipshod.

[…]
FOOL
The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.
LEAR
Because they are not eight.
FOOL
Yes. Thou wouldst make a good fool.
LEAR
O, let me not be mad, sweet heaven!
I would not be mad.
Keep me in temper. I would not be mad. (*King Lear*, I.v.8-12, 34-38, 45-47)

Shakespeare's style also inspired Dickinson's taste for assonance, alliteration, and repetition. A beating rhythm of lines that, depending on the circumstances, may sounds sinister, as in King Lear's case ("And my poor fool is hanged. No, no life" [V.iii.300]), or pounding, as in:

JAQUES
A fool, a fool, I met a fool i'th' forest,
A motley fool – a miserable world! –
As I do live by food, I met a fool,
Who laid him down and basked him in the sun,
And railed on Lady Fortune in good terms,
In good set terms, and yet a motley fool.
"Good morrow, fool", quoth I. "No, sir", quoth he,
"Call me not fool till heaven hath sent me fortune".
And then he drew a dial from his poke,
And looking on it with lack-lustre eye
Says very wisely "It is ten o'clock".
"Thus we may see", quoth he, "how the world wags.
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven.
And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot;
And thereby hangs a tale".
(*As You like It*, II.vii.12-28)

LEAR
O, that way madness lies. Let me shun that.
No more of that.
[…]
This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.
(*King Lear*, III.iv.20-21, 70)

Lines that seem to perfectly integrate with Emily Dickinson's final lines in "The Wind didn't come from the Orchard – today" (no. 316):

And a hoarse "Get out of the way, I say",
Who'd be the fool to stay?
Would you – Say –
Would you be the fool to stay? (emphasis mine)

Another rhetorical question: "Would you be the fool to stay?". Sane? Sanity? Who is sane in Shakespeare's tragedy? Who is sane in Dickinson's poems? As she dared to maintain:

Witchcraft was hung, in History,
But History and I
Find all the Witchcraft that we need
Around us, every Day – (no. 1583)

And:

A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown –
Who ponders this tremendous scene –
This whole Experiment of Green –
As if it were his own! (no. 1333)

Year after year, Emily read the books she received as presents from her father and relatives as well as from the Evergreens, where Austin and his family lived. As time went by, however, she seemed to remain true to one volume in particular that has quite rarely been taken into account: *The Imitation of Christ* written around 1420 by Thomas à Kempis in medieval Latin. It was a devotional book,

written for young monks, that had become highly popular, to the point of being translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, and of course English. Susan and Emily shared a copy dated 1857 (notes and underlining might have been marked by either or both of them) until 1876, when Susan gave Emily another copy as a Christmas present (now at the Houghton Library, inscribed: "Emily with Love"). Both girls were fascinated by this book. It was especially popular among young women, while considered 'dangerous' by their families for an alarming exhortation: it invited its readers to choose to be "as strangers and pilgrims in this world" and learn the relevance of "the Love of Solitude and Silence" which one should practice in order to find peace and fulfillment, needless to say, to be "saved" (Kempis 1952, 167 and 50). Hence, a 'dangerous' book: not only vis-à-vis the sensual, secular attitude towards life, love, and personal interaction that Shakespeare had already been encouraging in his readers and audience (happy and tragic endings included), but mainly in relation to the personality of the recipient of Susan's gift. Emily avoided going to church, hiding in the Homestead cellar while her whole family was attending mass. She preferred to share with Susan "the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing" (L77, about February 1852). Certainly the Dicksinsons did not suspect that she would eventually call God a "Merchant", "Banker" (no. 49), "Eclipse" (L261, 25 April 1862), 'Necromancer' (no. 177) and "distant – stately Lover" (no. 357).

Her passion for writing and reading and her independence from a heavenly God was so strong that she never did give up reading despite the book's suggestion that praying would be better than reading.

Kempis' book was indeed 'dangerous' for this self-secluded young lady. She most certainly took the author's invitation "to go abroad but seldom" and "to avoid being seen" and her choice of "Solitude and Silence" (Kempis 1952, 50-52) certainly found endorsement in the chapter dedicated to "Personal Humility" which presented it to her as the right and only one: "[…] but a good life refreshes the mind, and a clean conscience brings great confidence in God" (28-29).

She certainly did abide by Thomas à Kempis' lesson, yet we can presume it was Shakespeare and not God she trusted. We can also

presume that imitating Christ interested her less than imitating Shakespeare's earthly search and characters.

Herald of a New Age

Dickinson's fascination with Shakespeare remained unshakable throughout her life. He was her literary model, her master. His heroes and heroines were her companions. In 1882, she declared to her sister-in-law: "With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living – To say that sincerely is strange praise" (L757, about 1882).

Shakespeare did bring Susan and Emily closer together, in a deeper transitive way. The two shared their fascination for Shakespeare, reciting his lines, quoting him in their letters, exchanging quips from their copies of a daily Shakespeare calendar keeping his words and lines alive between them. Lines to which Emily often added her own poems, at times even dedicating them to her sister-in-law, who collected them one after the other, unaware that they were somehow shaping Emily's *persona* and identity, for her readers to come.

Despite not being the first one to publish her sister-in-law's work, Susan unknowingly became the main intermediary between Emily and us. She was certainly one of the main recipients of Emily's letters, flowers, and poems. In her private collection, Susan transcribed lines of Emily's poems splitting them into shorter lines, such as "Those not live yet / Who doubt to live again" (no. 1454), also adding an interesting note at the bottom of the poem: "To read to friends". She used to read them to her guests. Sometimes she even cut out Emily's signature to send it as a gift to those who admired her the most, and wanted to know more about the white-clad recluse and her untraditional poetic compositions.

Before becoming her husband's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd was one of those guests she read them to. She wrote about those soirées in her diary: "Went in the afternoon to Mrs. Dickinson's. She read me some strange poems by Emily Dickinson. They are full of power" (quoted in Sewall 1980, 217).

Full of power they were indeed, because obscure, terse, enigmatic, weaved with literary echoes, quotations from the Book of Revelation and from Shakespeare.

So if Emerson published "Ode to Beauty", Emily, who had learned from Keats the meaning of Beauty, would answer "I died for Beauty – but was scarce" (no. 449) and "Estranged from Beauty – none can be" (no. 1474). When her poem "Success is counted sweetest" (no. 67) was anonymously published in *The Brooklyn Daily Union* in 1864 and mistakenly credited to Emerson, she could not care less. Nor did she care about Susan's house parties, where Emerson was a habitual guest, unaffected as she was by his considerations and thoughts. He believed in Nature, in the possibility that a whole "Circumference" would enclose Nature and Man, whereas Emily was more fascinated by Platonic ideas ("I never saw a Moor", no. 1052) and she would rather ask questions than suggest answers. As her letters proved, she was more concerned about European literature and Shakespeare's oeuvre, although she would still state:

> To see the Summer Sky
> Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie –
> True Poems flee – (no. 1472)

In the same years in which Emerson recognized Walt Whitman – who believed in a world where one's identity would merge with that of others – as the new voice and identity of American poetry, Emily Dickinson – who claimed not to have read his work – would write "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (no. 288), reversing Whitman's approach to the "self".

Emily's feelings never seem to be filled with doubt. For both "Nature and God" know her "so well", to the point of 'startling' her, 'executing' her "identity", erasing it from her own vision of the world:

> Nature and God – I neither knew
> Yet Both so well knew me
> They startled, like Executors
> Of My identity.

Yet Neither told – that I could learn –
My Secret as secure
At Herschel's private interest
Or Mercury's affair – (no. 835)

Nevertheless, she knows she is lying to herself, as "God cannot be found" as she states in "Those – dying then" (no. 1551). She knows that the world and *her* world are split by God's "amputated hand". Just like Hamlet, she knows that "time is out of joint" and lets Hamlet doubts "for all us" .

Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together.
(*Hamlet*, I.v.187-91)

Shakespeare's lines, where 'pauses' meant an expectation of change, or allude to a sidereal uncertainty (albeit not for the spectator), turn any statement upside down into its opposite, as in *Hamlet*:

POLONIUS
[…] Will you walk out of the air, my lord?
HAMLET
Into my grave.
POLONIUS
Indeed, that is out o'th' air. (*Aside*) How pregnant sometimes his replies are! […] My lord, I will take my leave of you.
HAMLET
You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal – except my life, my life, my life.
POLONIUS
(*going*) Fare you well, my lord.
(II.ii.208-11, 215-20)

Hamlet's pauses as he doubts, but at the same time he knows his choice is the right one. He is a character as well as an actor in the

play-within-the play he performs in the castle of Elsinore. He is in doubt, and reasonably so, but nonetheless speaks and interacts with ghosts. Hamlet knows about insanity. So does King Lear – and his Fool, the King's double. Emily Dickinson calls on Shakespeare's tragic heroes and heroine as she expresses the drama of the human heart in "Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day" (no. 741):

> Drama's Vitallest expression is the Common Day
> That arise and set about Us –
> Other Tragedy
>
> Perish in the Recitation –
> This – the best enact
> When the Audience is scattered
> And the Boxes shut –
>
> "Hamlet" to Himself were Hamlet –
> Had not Shakespeare wrote –
> Though the "Romeo" left no Record
> Of his Juliet,
>
> It were infinite enacted
> In the Human Heart –
> Only Theatre recorded
> Owner cannot shut –

As Dana had commented in his lectures on Shakespeare, Hamlet was the "Idealistic poet estranged from the real world"[7]. Just like Emily, who never identified with a contemporary writer around her, but only with her beloved Shakespeare.

In a letter to Higginson (February 1879), she once confessed:

> Mother's hopeless illness, overwhelmed my Moments, though your Pages and Shakespeare's, like Ophir – remain – (L593)

To her, Shakespeare was "like Ophir" – according to King Solomon (the Bible), a source of wonders, riches, silver, gold, sandalwood,

[7] See Finnerty 2006, 193.

ivory pearls.

She often took on Hamlet's role. She quotes Hamlet's "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow […]. The readiness is all" (V.ii.165-68) in a letter to Mrs Bowles, after Mr Bowles' death on 6 September 1881:

> Mr. Samuel "sparrow" does not "fall" without the fervent "notice". (L724)

In a letter dated August 1885 to Samuel Bowles' son, she uses Shakespeare's words again (*Hamlet*, II.ii.50):

> If ever of any act of mine you should be in need, let me replay with the Laureate, "Speak that I live to hear!" (L1012)

Emily had literally entered Shakespeare's world. As in one of her notes to her sister-in-law, when she used Hamlet's lines to express her feelings: "Do you remember what Hamlet whispered to 'Horatio'?" (L1028).

Courting Susan allows her to wear different masks, in her letters she becomes alternatively a male and a female *persona* as she pleases, as when quoting *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.232-33:

> Will my great Sister accept the minutiae of Devotion, with timidity that is no more?
> Susan's Calls are like Antony's Supper –
> "And pays his Heart for what his Eyes eat, only –" (L854, about 1883)

Similarly, in a letter to Otis Phillips Lord:

> Was it to him the Thief cried "Lord remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom", and is it to us that he replies, "This Day thou shalt be with me in Paradise"?
> The Propounder of Paradise must indeed possess it – Antony's remark to a friend, "since Cleopatra died" is said to be the saddest ever lain in Language – That engulfing "*Since*". (L791, about 1882)

Shakespeare's characters are ubiquitous in Emily's letters: Emily is in turns Hamlet, Cleopatra, Desdemona, Macbeth, and, last but

not least, Othello.

The actor Tommaso Salvini played the role of Othello in his American tour in 1873-74. Critics unanimously praised his performance as a "masterpiece of elocution". Emily, who presumably related to Othello's distress, once wrote in a letter to Mrs Whitney: "Othello is uneasy, but then Othellos always are, they hold such mighty stakes". She also tells her how Austin, who knew about her fascination for Othello and admiration for the Italian actor, "brought" her a "picture of Salvini when he was last in Boston". And she adds:

> The brow is that of Deity – the eyes, those of the lost, but the power lies in the *throat* – pleading, sovereign, savage – the panther and the dove! (L948, autumn 1884)

Emily's relationship with Shakespeare's characters "wavered". Just like Hamlet. After wearing Hamlet's mask, she takes on Othello's and then Antony's.

In a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd dated March 1885:

> Nature forgot – The Circus reminded her –
> Thanks for the Ethiopian Face.
> The Orient is in the West.
> "You knew, Oh Egypt" said the entangled Antony – (L978)

In one of her letters to O. P. Lord from whom she had received a copy of the *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*, she dedicates these lines to him:

> Dont [sic] you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – dont [sic] you know that "No" is the wildest word we consign to Language?
> […]
> It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread.
> That unfrequented Flower. (L562, about 1878)

Like Cleopatra, she is unattainable. She was in fact reluctant to meet the male recipients of her letters – provided she ever actually

mailed them – such as T. W. Higginson, Judge O. P. Lord, Samuel Bowles (editor of the *Springfield Republican*) and Reverend Charles Wadsworth, her third potential suitor, as her gossipy sister-in-law maintained.

In her hesitation to meet anyone in person, Emily liked to be mysterious, elusive, playing various roles and identities depending on her interlocutors.

She was actor and actress. She was both male and female, echoing the gender play in Shakespeare's comedies. She must have also known about British actress Charlotte Cushman who could cross the gender line, performing flawlessly in both male and female roles, playing for instance Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Though lacking any direct reference to Cushman, Emily must have known about her, about her contralto voice, at least from reading the *Springfield Republican* which described the actress as "the most passionate of Romeos" and the "fiercest of Ladies Macbeth"[8].

Emily was fascinated with Romeo's figure, which she often quotes in her letters.

In a letter to Elizabeth Dickinson Currier (17 April 1886), she quotes Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.i.37):

> "I do remember an Apothecary", said that sweeter Robin than Shakespeare, was a loved paragraph which has lain on my Pillow all Winter, but perhaps Shakespeare has been "up street" oftener than I have, this Winter. (L1041)

Again in January 1882, she writes to Mrs J. A. Sweetser quoting *Romeo and Juliet*'s line "As is with bud bit with an envious worm" (I.i.157, Montague), to tell her about her cherished plants:

> Last was a fatal season – An "Envious Worm" attached them – then in early Autumn we had Midwinter Frost. (L746)

Reference to death and the worm had already appeared in one of her earliest known poems ("The *worm* doth woo the *mortal*, death

[8] See Finnerty 2006, 197.

claims a living bride") published anonymously in the *Springfield Republican* in 1850, a "valentine" (no. 1), where, echoing Shakespeare's sonnets, she invites a single young man to choose among "Six true, and comely maidens", in a parody of romantic love. In a second valentine young Emily wrote that same year, she played with biblical language, closing her letter with the "all hail" of Macbeth's witches (*Macbeth*, I.iii.46-48, 67)[9].

This Was a Dream

Yet another image, that of the worm, which can be traced back to several of Shakespeare's passages, along with that of winter: heaven and hell, pleasure and pain (intertwined with love) as in his tragedies and sonnets, seem to lead, as T. S. Eliot knew, to a "wasteland" inhabited by dirt, empty streets, dry paper, and silent tormented human beings. The worm and the snake then. I will not enter the labyrinth of potential Freudian readings for either one[10] but have found a specific pertinent presence in the passages below:

> No longer mourn for me when I am dead
> Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
> Give warning to the world that I am fled
> From this vile world with the vilest *worms* to dwell.
> (*Sonnet 71*, 1-4, emphasis mine)

> CLEOPATRA
> Hast thou the pretty *worm*
> Of Nilus there, that kills and pains not?
> (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.238-39, emphasis mine)

> MERCUTIO
> Her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat
> Not half so big as a round little *worm*
> Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.iv.65-67, emphasis mine)

[9] Presumably to George Gould, an associate of her father (Sewall 1980, 419-21).

[10] See, for instance, Dickinson 2010.

CLIFFORD
The smallest *worm* will turn, being trodded on,
And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood.
(*3 Henry VI*, II.ii.17-18, emphasis mine)

HAMLET
Not where he eats, but where he a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic *worms* are e'en at him.
[…]
A man may fish with the *worm* that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that *worm*.
(*Hamlet*, IV.iii.20-21, 27-28, emphasis mine)

The image of the worm/serpent is of course used as a disturbing element of the natural world: it blights flowers and crops, feeds on rotten flesh or, when transfigured into a viper or a deadly snake, it poisons to death a sensual, healthy, flesh, as in Cleopatra's death. Despite snakes being obviously more sinister than worms and potentially malignant – considering their size and venom – Shakespeare introduces them even in his lighter plays, such as *Henry VI* and *As You Like It*, that do not end tragically.
In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the Fairies sing:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blindworms, do not wrong;
Come not near our Fairy Queen.
Philomel with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby. (II.ii.9-14)

and Rosalind in *As You Like It*:

Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love. (IV.i.99-101)

I see love hath made thee a tame snake. (IV.ii.70-71)

And in *2 Henry VI*:

QUEEN MARGARET
Or as the snake rolled in flow'ring bank
With shiny chequered slough doth sting a child
That for the beauty thinks it excellent. (III.i.228-30)

Emily Dickinson offers the image of the snake as "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (no. 986). A poem that is worth mentioning here because it is narrated through the eyes of a boy. As she sometimes used the masculine in referring to herself in both poems and letters, for her dramatic *persona* in this particular poem she chooses to wear that of a "barefoot boy":

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides –
You may have met Him – did you not
His notice sudden is –

The Grass divides as with a Comb –
A spotted shaft is seen –
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on –

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn –
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot –
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone –

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me –
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality –

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone –

Unaware of danger, a boy comes across and touches what he believes to be a "whip", which turns out to be a snake, 'wrinkling away' as a snake would. In the last two quatrains, the boy has become an adult, aware of the risk he has just run. However, the final line does not allow readers to abandon the scenery they have entered. Its final dash opens to more possible readings. Dickinson feels "a transport / Of cordiality", which is hoped and looked for in the quatrain preceding the last one. It freezes the reader, though promising an irreversible emotion that Dickinson encapsulates in a highly impressive "zero at the bone".

Albeit undated, the poem seems to juxtapose itself and entangle with "In Winter in my Room" (no. 1670), where the encounter with the snake turns the monologue into a dramatic exchange between the lyrical subject and the frightening being she encounters in her room, later to realize, at the very (happy) end, that it was just a dream. An encounter that, as mentioned above, some critics have interpreted as the account of a sexual initiation.

In Winter in my Room
I came upon a Worm –
Pink, lank and warm –
But as he was a worm
And worms presume
Not quite with him at home –
Secured him by a string
To something neighboring
and went along.

A Trifle afterward
A thing occurred
I'd not believe it if I heard
But state with creeping blood –
A snake with mottles rare
Surveyed my chamber floor
In feature as the worm before
But ringed with power –
The very string with which
I tied him – too
When he was mean and new
That string was there –

I shrank – "How fair you are"!
Propitiation's claw –
"Afraid", he hissed
"Of me"?
"No cordiality" –
He fathomed me –
Then to a Rhythm *Slim*
Secreted in his Form
As Patterns swim
Projected him.

That time I flew
Both eyes his way
Lest he pursue
Nor ever ceased to run
Till in a distant Town
Towns on from mine
I set me down
This was a dream.

The poem foresees a seduction that echoes a fairy tale (as in "Once upon a time") where fear and horror – as in most fairy tales – are coupled and intertwined with the expected happy ending. If one considers the suggested Freudian interpretation as plausible, we might see why Higginson decided not to publish Dickinson's "Wild nights – Wild nights!" (no. 249) about two lovers longing to meet each other: that very poem, according to Higginson, would have turned the pure "virgin recluse" (as her acquaintances and friends considered her) into a less virginal New England young girl. As he wrote in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd, dated 21 April 1891, discussing the second series of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*:

> Let us alter as little as possible, now that the public ear is opened. One poem only I dread a little to print – that wonderful "Wild Nights" – lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there. (Quoted in Bingham 1945a, 127)

Realistically speaking, snakes like the very poisonous copperhead snake did inhabit the New England grounds, and it is

very likely that Emily had learned about their existence from her textbooks, but also during a solitary walk in the wilderness, a habit for her – which also suggests that she was not so reluctant to venture out of the house on her own. I would however argue that in this poem she tried, as she rarely did, to give shape to a nightmare she had, or perhaps only imagined, carefully crafting music and images, with assonance and alliteration, and possibly recalling Cleopatra's destiny in one of her favorite tragedies. It seems to echo the final scene where the Queen, waiting for the "pretty worm / Of Nilus" is about to give her clearsighted awe-inspiring monologue, which ends with her death:

> Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
> Immortal longings in me. Now no more
> The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
> […]
> Yare, yare, good Iras, quick – methinks I hear
> Antony call. I see him rouse himself
> To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
> The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
> To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come.
> Now to that name my courage prove my title.
> I am fire and air; my other elements
> I give to baser life.
> (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.275-85)

A death that Shakespeare envisaged immersed in silence, as she closes her life 'royally':

> FIRST GUARD
> Where's the Queen?
> CHARMIAN
> Speak softly. Wake her not.
> FIRST GUARD
> Caesar hath sent –
> CHARMIAN
> Too slow a messenger.
> […]
> FIRST GUARD
> What work is here, Charmian? Is this well done?

CHARMIAN
It is well done, and fitting for a princess
Descended of so many royal kings.
[…]
CAESAR
Bravest at the last,
She levelled at our purposes, and, being royal,
Took her own way.
(314-16, 320-22, 329-31)

To death and silence Cleopatra, just like Hamlet, is doomed.

To die, to sleep.
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time.
(*Hamlet*, III.i.66-72)

Emily Dickinson too knew what silence could mean, as in "Great Streets of silence led away" (no. 1159), "Silence is all we dread" (no. 1251), and "Speech is one symptom of Affection" (no. 1681). It was silence, like night, and darkness that allowed her to reach the dark, warm language of poetry. Surrounded and protected by silence, her words could become strong, dramatic, absolute.

Unpathed Waters and Undreamed Shores

Nevertheless, the point to be addressed in most of Emily Dickinson's poems, in my opinion, is not that of sexuality that some literary criticism has pursued, but rather that of 'sensuousness'.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity –

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? (no. 76)

'Twas such a little – little boat
That toddled down the bay!
'Twas such a gallant – gallant sea
That beckoned it away!

'Twas such a greedy, greedy wave
That licked it from the Coast –
Nor ever guessed the stately sails
My little craft was *lost*! (no. 107)

In that sense, I would suggest looking at poem no. 520, "I started Early – Took my Dog", whose line "We met the Solid Town", comparable to the final line "This was a dream" in "In Winter in my Room", implies that the *persona* has survived a threat: not that of a deadly snake bite, but that of being swept away by the ocean. The innocent and inexperienced girl has escaped the danger of being swallowed, or perhaps seduced as the third stanza implies, by the tide:

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Bodice – too –

Dickinson first depicts the ocean as a voracious man and then as a knight who, "bowing – with a Mighty look", eventually relinquishes his hold of her. The sea allows the girl, who was at first innocently dreaming of "Mermaids" and "Frigates", to go back to "the Solid Town", the community she belongs to and where she is safe. Her virginity (hasn't the sea tried to undress her?) is safe, or at least the way she copes with it. She underlines the strength of the *persona* involved, though probably doomed to subdue, eventually, to the mighty waves and tides cited in other poems, such as "Water, is taught by thirst" (no. 135) and "I think that the Root of the Wind

is Water" (no. 1302). Knowing how sensitive she was in her readings, one can easily trace the reference to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

> Like as *the waves make towards the pebbled shore*,
> So do our minutes hasten to their end,
> Each changing place with that which goes before;
> *In sequent toil all forwards do contend*.
> Nativity, once in the main of light,
> Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned
> Crookèd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
> And time that gave doth now his gift confound.
> Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
> And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;
> Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
> And *nothing stands but for his scythe to mow*.
> And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
> Praising thy worth despite his cruel hand.
> (*Sonnet 60*, emphasis mine)

> When I have seen *the hungry ocean gain*
> Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
> And *the firm soil win of the wat'ry main*,
> Increasing store with loss and loss with store.
> (*Sonnet 64*, 5-8, emphasis mine)

Shakespeare too depicts a threatening sea where the motion of the waves symbolizes birth and the irreversible journey towards death:

> MESSENGER
> The ocean, overpeering of his list,
> Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
> Than young Laertes, in riotous head,
> O'erbears your officers.
> (*Hamlet*, IV.v.97-100)

Attracted and repulsed by danger, Emily's *persona* "wavers" one step in and one step away, while the sea follows her and caresses her feet "overflow[n] with Pearl". She paints here an image we all

loved as children: seeing our feet in the shallow water covered with shiny bubbles of water. Readers appreciate that image and its memory just like she does, sensing the wonder she feels. The *persona* has been held and then released by the very element that was going to seduce her, thus staging a peculiar game. Who is the seducer? And who is being seduced?

So much for the struggle between the *persona* and the strength of water. What about the more explicit metaphor of her being the 'prisoner' of an unidentified executioner?

In this respect Emily's readers have also wondered about the hidden meaning of the poem "He put the Belt around my life" (no. 273), whose sensuous subject could relate to that of the above mentioned poems (nos. 1670 and 76).

It was Elémire Zolla, the first Italian scholar to go beyond the early stereotypes that Emily Dickinson's critics were 'doomed' to face, who pointed out that the image of "the Belt" might have been taken from medieval mystical knowledge (Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 1670). I would complement Zolla's useful remark quoting "Did the Harebell loose her girdle" (no. 213). Both poems address the image of a subdued condition, where the "Belt" and the "girdle" in the two titles imply enclosure and imprisonment, the confinement from which the dramatic *persona*, the supposed female victim, wants to 'free' herself.

Needless to say, Shakespeare too had played with the image of the girdle:

> KING HENRY
> Into the sea; and other times to see
> The beach *girdle* of the ocean
> Too wide for Neptune's hips.
> (*2 Henry IV*, III.ii.48-50, emphasis mine)

> ROBIN
> I'll put a *girdle* round about the earth
> In forty minutes.
> (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.175-76, emphasis mine).

Considering the sensuousness that exudes from many of Emily Dickinson' s poems and letters alongside her 'religious' quest, I

often wondered why some of the questions I was frequently asked either by my students at the end of a seminar, or by my audience at the end of a lecture, were: "Did she ever have a lover?", "Did she know what a sexual encounter was?", "Was she really the distressed, fragile, and withdrawn woman that so many critics assumed her to be?". I have always let her writings answer – "Poetry or love coeval come":

> To pile like Thunder to it's close
> Then crumble grand away
> While Everything created hid
> This – would be Poetry –
>
> Or Love – the two coeval come
> We both and neither prove –
> Experience either and consume –
> For None see God and live – (no. 1247)

After all, poetry was an emotional (and physical) affair for Emily Dickinson. As she wrote to Higginson in a letter dated 16 August 1870:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way. (L342)

In closing, given that Shakespeare was one of *the* constant reference points in Emily Dickinson's readings and writings, and Hamlet a plausible mask of hers, let me recall Frank Kermode's reading of the figure of Hamlet, in which he points out: "[N]o one much like Hamlet ever existed before. That is why images of Hamlet usually reflect what came after, not before him. To take him as a herald of a new age is neither idolatrous nor hyperbolical. In this new age we need not expect matters to be made easy for us. The new mastery is a mastery of the ambiguous, the unexpected, of conflicting evidence and semantic audacity. We are challenged to make sense, even mocked if we fail" (Kermode 2000, 125).

Let us accept Kermode's challenge. If, in Mabel Loomis Todd's

words, Emily Dickinson's poems were "strange" and "full of power", we may add they were very 'audacious'. Audacious vis-à-vis her contemporary fellow poets and readers, and why not, even today. Her message and the way she shaped it were as strong and mysterious as her life. It was 1863 when she wrote "One need not to be a Chamber – to be Haunted" (no. 670).

> One need not to be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
> One need not be a House –
> The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
> Material Place –
>
> Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
> External Ghost
> Than its interior Confronting –
> That Cooler Host.
>
> Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
> The Stones a'chase –
> Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter –
> In lonesome Place –
>
> Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
> Should startle most –
> Assassin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least.
>
> The Body – borrows a Revolver –
> He bolts the Door –
> O'erlooking a superior spectre –
> Or More –

She opened up to questions her contemporaries were not even dreaming of. How does identity get shaped? Does it get shaped at all? And if it does, how can it be managed? Is identity concealed? Is it 'oneself behind oneself'? Does one's identity hide behind what we assume is our public identity?

Dickinson had no answers but wrote about it, and as if apologizing, in a letter to Mrs Holland, dated early August 1856, she 'asked': "Pardon my sanity […] in a world *in*sane" (L185).

How could she dare? She, *sane* among *insane* people? Was she self-centered? Audacious, heretic? The latter she was (that we know) and certainly audacious too. Self-centered? Perhaps.

Shakespeare never used the word "identity", it was not a category of his times. Not yet! Influenced, or inspired by the characters he had created, Emily Dickinson shaped it for us, mainly through her words. Words that take contours, words that live in being pronounced and written, words that draw meaning through monologues (even a dialogue becomes a dramatic soliloquy for her) ending in a mysterious laconic "Finite infinity":

> There is a solitude of space
> A solitude of sea
> A solitude of death, but these
> Society shall be
> Compared with that profounder site
> That polar privacy
> A soul admitted to itself –
> Finite infinity. (no. 1695)

The 'itself' she eventually discovered, and we with her, was *her own self* – the thing she had sought throughout her erratic, spasmodic, barefoot life.

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