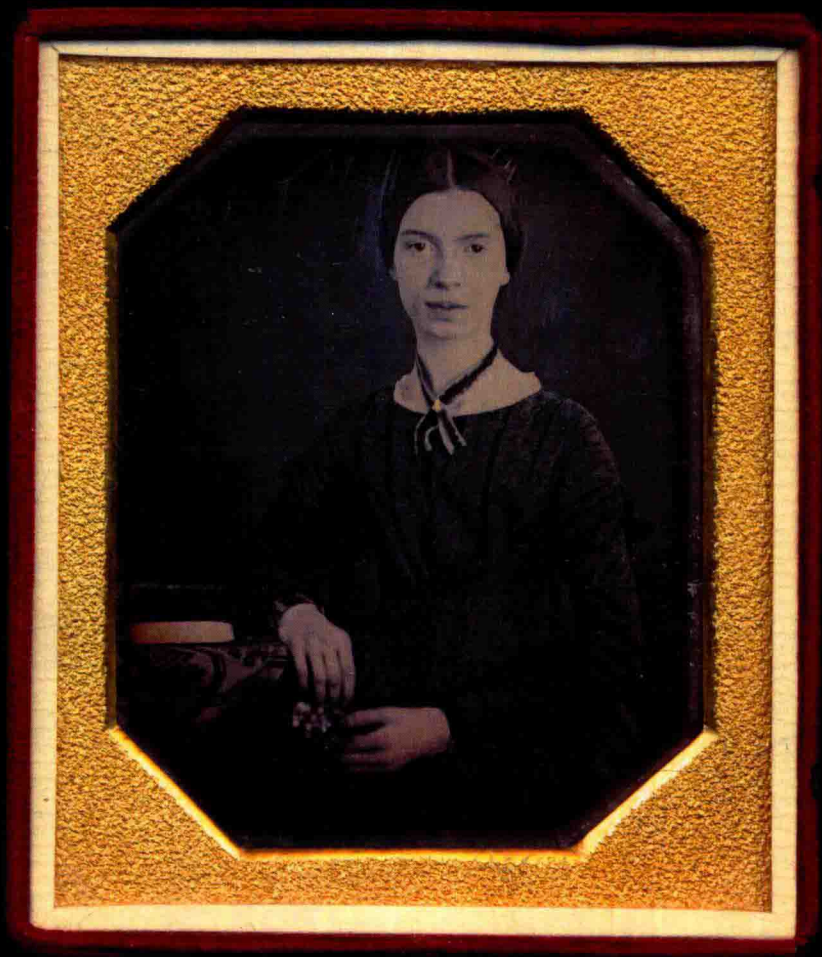


# DICKINSON

*in Her Own Time*



A BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONICLE OF HER LIFE,  
DRAWN FROM RECOLLECTIONS, INTERVIEWS, AND  
MEMOIRS BY FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND ASSOCIATES



*edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein,  
Stephanie Farrar, and Cristanne Miller*

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University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242

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www.uiowapress.org

Printed in the United States of America

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The University of Iowa Press is a member of Green Press Initiative and is committed to preserving natural resources.

Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dickinson in her own time : a biographical chronicle of her life, drawn from recollections, interviews, and memoirs by family, friends, and associates / edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein, Stephanie Farrar, Cristanne Miller.

pages cm. — (Writers in Their Own Time)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60938-391-6 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60938-392-3 (ebk)

1. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886. 2. Women poets, American—Biography. 3. Poets, American—19th century—Biography. 4. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886—Public opinion. 5. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886—Appreciation. 6. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886—Friends and associates. 7. Women and literature—United States—History—19th century. I. Eberwein, Jane Donahue, 1943-  
editor. II. Farrar, Stephanie, 1980- III. Miller, Cristanne.

PS1541.Z5D494 2015

811'.4—dc23

2015012976

## Dickinson in Her Own Time

WRITERS IN THEIR OWN TIME

Joel Myerson, *series editor*

## Acknowledgments



In gathering these materials, we have been greatly assisted by those who have already made such documents available in whole or in part, in particular to Martha Dickinson Bianchi for *Emily Dickinson Face to Face: Unpublished Letters with Notes and Reminiscences by Her Niece* (1932), Millicent Todd Bingham for *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* (1945), Jay Leyda for his chronicle of *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), Klaus Lubbers for *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution* (1968), and Willis J. Buckingham for *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History* (1989). Of equal assistance were biographers Richard Sewall (*The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 1974) and Alfred Habegger (*My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2001) in providing crucial information about documents and the poet's circle of acquaintances. Also of great use to anyone seeking documents relating to Dickinson are the *Dickinson Electronic Archives* and *Emily Dickinson's Correspondences: A Born Digital Textual Inquiry*, under the executive direction of Martha Nell Smith and Lara Vetter, respectively.

Original texts of materials we have used as sources, or assistance in locating original manuscripts, came from Amherst College's Robert Frost Library, Harvard University's Houghton Library, the Boston Public Library, Mount Holyoke Library, the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale, the Northampton Forbes Library, the University of Virginia Library, and the New York Public Library. Our thanks to these institutions for allowing us access to their materials. We would like to thank in particular Margaret Dakin at the Frost Library and Susan Halpert at the Houghton Library for assistance above and beyond reasonable expectation. For the use of visual images from their collections, we thank the Robert Frost Library, Amherst College; Tutt Library, Colorado College; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts; Monson Free Library, Monson, Massachusetts; and Yale University Library

### *Acknowledgments*

(Todd-Bingham Picture Collection). Full citations appear in the “Sources/Permissions” at the end of the book. Our thanks also to Jennifer Elinge and Gabrielle Marek of the University at Buffalo SUNY English Department, who provided crucial secretarial assistance, and to Allison Siehnel, also at UB, for assistance with research. Cristanne Miller is grateful to the Fulbright Foundation and to ACLS for fellowships, freeing her time for this work. And we together would like to thank Joel Myerson, series editor, and Catherine Cocks, at the University of Iowa Press, for inviting us to take on this delightful project and for helping us to complete our work efficiently.

Jane Donahue Eberwein  
Stephanie Farrar  
Cristanne Miller

## Abbreviations



The following abbreviations are used to refer  
to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

- Fr    *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 vols.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998. Citation by poem  
number.
- L    *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson  
and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP,  
1958. Citation by letter number.



## Introduction



In the 15 April 1862 letter that launched their correspondence, Emily Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson to ask whether “my Verse is alive” (L260). Although she thereafter replied with evasive answers to Higginson’s questions about her life, she boldly told him in another 1862 letter that she had already been approached by “two editors of Journals” who wanted to “use [her mind] for the World”—presumably to publish (L261). As the documents here attest, even before the first books of her poems were published in the 1890s, Dickinson was known to friends, neighbors, and even apparently to strangers as a writer of remarkable verses, encouraging speculations about her life that often came closer to fiction than biography. This book collects a broad range of writings that reflect impressions of Dickinson in her own time and for the first decades following the publication of her poems, beginning with her school days and continuing to the centennial of her birth, 1930, which was also the fortieth anniversary of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890). As Dickinson probably did not fully anticipate in the poem her first editors placed at the beginning of their collection, not just her poetry’s message but her life story was “committed / To Hands I cannot see” (Fr519).

Like other editors of books in the University of Iowa Press Writers in Their Own Time series, we seek biographical insight into a celebrated author’s life by assembling memoirs and recollections of family, friends, and associates. Because Emily Dickinson achieved literary recognition only through posthumous publication, however, we have assembled an unusually large number of documents, many quite short, to capture observations by those who knew the poet personally or could relay information passed on to them by others close to her. We have also deviated at times from chronological order, chiefly at the beginning of the book, where documentation of Dickinson’s youth necessitated some reliance on materials from the 1890s, after literary recognition aroused interest in her relatively

sociable early years. Little biographical information was available when the poems were first published in book form, and her first editors limited what they disclosed to what her family was willing to make known. Most personal memoirs appeared considerably after the poet's death and reflected spotty memories of distant family members or former neighbors, who often relied on stories they themselves had picked up from family or local lore. Nonetheless, the overall picture of the poet that emerges from these documents is convincing in its general accuracy, at least to readers not greatly concerned about details such as whether (or when) the poet's hair appeared straight or curly.

As a result of the unique circumstances of Dickinson's almost entirely posthumous publication, we in effect document two intersecting and mutually dependent lives: that of Emily Dickinson and that of her writing. In addition to biographical materials, we include some promotional materials, reviews, and correspondence relating to early publications, as well as some documents from the later 1890s and into the twentieth century that show changing assessments of her poetry in response to evolving critical standards. Those literary reassessments, in turn, promoted further interest in the poet's life.

This collection includes both well-known documents and material printed or collected for the first time. So far as we know, Lavinia Dickinson's poem to Emily on their mother's death has never been printed, nor have Elihu Vedder's letter to Lavinia, Emily Fowler Ford's 30 April 1893 letter, nor the full version of Ford's memoir that was condensed for *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1894). A substantial extract from a review of *A Masque of Poets* is reprinted here for the first time since its 1878 publication. A previously unpublished excerpt from Amelia D. Jones Stearns's reminiscence of her and Emily Dickinson's time at Mount Holyoke Seminary provides both new reading and an unfamiliar perspective on the pleasures of seminary life. Major parts of a revealing group of newspaper articles from the 1870s on Dickinson's suspected authorship of Helen Hunt Jackson's "Saxe Holm" stories are collected here for the first time, as is the full text of Amy Lowell's 1918 lecture on Dickinson. Kate Scott Anthon's letter to Susan Dickinson (undated, but after 1877) is available online but now appears in print. Family reminiscences that have only been available in abbreviated versions include those by cousins Clara Newman Turner, Louisa Norcross, Helen Knight Bullard Wyman, Ella Cowles Ellis, and Jenny Lind Cowles.

Alice James's diary entry has been available in print but not specifically called to the attention of Dickinson scholars.

These documents provide evidence that counters some popular conceptions of the poet's life and reception. First, evidence throughout this collection mitigates assumptions that the writer best known for poems focused on loss, death, and immortality was herself a morose soul. Instead, she was observed by those close to her throughout her life to be humorous, playful, and interested in other people. Emily Ellsworth Fowler Ford's prefatory memoir for the first collection of Dickinson's letters recalls her friend as winning recognition for her humor columns in student publications. Kate Scott Anthon savored memories of Emily joining joyously in social gatherings at her brother and sister-in-law's home as a young woman, and Martha Dickinson Bianchi transmitted family accounts of Emily's wit along with her own observations of her aunt's high-spirited defiance of convention. Bianchi's childhood playmate, MacGregor Jenkins, shared with the reading world his memories of Dickinson's eager participation in children's fun. Documents collected here also point to the more familiar story of her eventual withdrawal into her home, to habits she cultivated in her middle and older age to elude observation by anyone outside the limited circle with whom she felt comfortable, and to behaviors Higginson traced at the time of his 1870 visit to "excess of tension."

Second, Dickinson was in fact identified as a writer during her lifetime. As is well known, she maintained literary and personal correspondence with major representatives of the national literary scene: Samuel Bowles, publisher of the *Springfield Republican*; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, radical reformer, critic, editor, and writer of wide influence and distinction; Josiah Gilbert Holland, literary editor for the *Republican* and later founder and editor of *Scribner's*; and Helen Hunt Jackson, who spent part of her childhood in Amherst and had become one of the most respected poets and writers of her day. Additionally, Dickinson actively corresponded with editor Thomas Niles—a correspondence that laid the groundwork for Roberts Brothers' publication of the 1890, 1891, and 1896 *Poems by Emily Dickinson* and the 1894 *Letters*. It appears that Dickinson simultaneously sought both not to publish and to keep open possibilities of eventual publication—as suggested in a 17 May 1894 letter from Mabel Todd to the editor of the *Century Magazine*. Here Todd mentions Lavinia's recollection "that for some years before her death [Emily] was accustomed to send off many

letters and packages addressed to 'Roswell Smith, Century Company'" (Bingham 279).

Sending poems to these literary figures as well as to friends and neighbors meant that Dickinson developed a reputation as a remarkable writer even while maintaining extreme levels of privacy. This is nowhere better shown than in the previously mentioned summer 1878 flurry of articles in western Massachusetts newspapers speculating on the authorship of the stories and poems that had appeared in *Scribner's* under the pseudonym "Saxe Holm." Speculation pointed both to Jackson (the author) and to the reputedly brilliant daughter of a distinguished Amherst family. Bowles's *Republican* put a halt to such inquiries with its flat declaration that "we happen to *know* that no person by the name of Dickinson is in any way responsible for the Saxe Holm stories." Nonetheless, whoever suggested that possibility either knew some of Dickinson's work or intuited the kind of writing she could be imagined to produce: "Saxe Holm is essentially a poet. Her stories are weird and improbable; her poems are like strains of solemn music floating at night from some way-side church." This speculation recurred in the *Northampton Daily Herald* death notice for Dickinson and was mentioned by several reviewers in the 1890s.

Evidence compiled here also demonstrates that Emily Dickinson herself made considerable provision for the survival of her poems and laid the groundwork for their eventual publication. The friendships she cultivated, the booklets preserving her poems copied in fair hand, the writings she circulated, and the rumors of literary accomplishment that her reclusiveness encouraged indicate that she may have anticipated eventual recognition. There may well have been some truth to Jenny Lind Cowles's memory of the family seamstress who recalled the poet saying "I have a horror of death; the dead are so soon forgotten. But when I die, they'll have to remember me." In particular, sustained correspondence with Higginson from 1862 until her death, recounted in his essay on "Emily Dickinson's Letters," shows her cultivating an important literary friendship—making sure he had many of her poems in his possession even while discouraging any overtures toward immediate publication.

When "Sic transit gloria mundi" (Fr2) appeared anonymously in the 20 February 1852 issue of the *Springfield Republican* (the first Dickinson poem so publicized, though a prose Valentine had appeared in the Amherst College *Indicator* two years earlier), the newspaper editor issued a friendly

invitation: "The hand that wrote the following amusing medley to a gentleman friend of ours, as 'a valentine,' is capable of writing very fine things, and there is certainly no presumption in entertaining a private wish that a correspondence, more direct than this, may be established between it and the *Republican*." As this note indicates, six years before 1858, when she began to collect her poems in her own handmade "fascicle" booklets, Dickinson was recognized publicly as a "fine" writer, although she neglected—or perhaps deferred—opportunities to make her achievements public. Only ten Dickinson poems are known to have been printed during her lifetime, none with her name attached. Martha Dickinson Bianchi represented her aunt as alarmed on finding "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124) printed in the *Republican* in 1862, but a letter to the poet from Bianchi's mother, Emily's sister-in-law and best friend Susan (Sue), on the day the publication appeared, seems triumphant. Susan writes, "*Has girl read Republican?* It takes as long to start our Fleet as the Burnside," suggesting that the two young women anticipated Emily's eventual fame—compared here to a Civil War military campaign. Bianchi reported in her preface to *The Single Hound* (1914) that both she and her mother interpreted Emily's statement in an 1861 letter to Susan, "Could I make you and Austin – proud – sometime – a great way off – 'twould give me taller feet" (L238), as a kind of license to publish her poems in the twentieth century. Helen Hunt Jackson's repeated requests for Dickinson to make "Success is counted sweetest" (Fr112) available for anonymous publication in *A Masque of Poets* (1878) eventually bore fruit despite the poet's reticence. Dickinson apparently did authorize Jackson to submit the poem, and after its publication she undertook a correspondence with the book's editor, Thomas Niles, that continued almost to her death.

Even as a two-year-old, when she was staying with her mother's family, little Emily drew attention for playing with language and sounds. A 9 May 1833 letter from her Aunt Lavinia Norcross to Edward Dickinson related the child's comments and the delight she took in eliciting "moosic" from the piano (Leyda 1:21). Later, Dickinson was closely observed by friends and neighbors who knew that she wrote. The first document in this collection is a letter from D. T. Fiske, a schoolmaster at Amherst Academy, who remembered the originality of Emily's compositions. One of the last is Gertrude Montague Graves's newspaper article reporting her father's experience hearing Emily's nighttime improvisations on the family's piano, a

kind of composition that perhaps paralleled the metrical experimentation in verses she was already composing. Even after Dickinson became reclusive, neighbors reported on occasions when they were invited to sing or play the piano for her enjoyment, and—as mentioned previously—those who were children during Dickinson's life later chronicled her joining in, or abetting, their childhood play. Words, music, and playfulness are recurring themes within these memoirs and were obviously major indicators of Dickinson's poetic gifts. According to her sister, "her power of language was unlike any one who ever lived."

Dickinson's reclusiveness after she reached her late twenties or early thirties is well known. Less clearly understood is that we know so little about the poet because her immediate family and closest friends were equally reticent about revealing any personal details about her. Emily's brother William Austin (Austin), her sister Lavinia (Vinnie), and her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson (Sue) guarded her privacy even after her death, denying biographers what could have been their most reliable sources of insight. Occasional comments gleaned from early letters between Lavinia and Austin give us glimpses into the family's understanding of this gifted member, but once Austin and Lavinia completed their educations, they had little occasion for letter-writing. Whatever family members noticed about Emily was apparently reserved for conversation or left unsaid.

Lavinia, Austin, and Susan never agreed about what Emily's hopes for her poems may have been. Bianchi recalled in her introduction to *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1929) that her Aunt Lavinia heard Emily's "repeated murmur in her later years, 'Oh, Vinnie, my work, my work'" but "was at a loss to understand." Although Lavinia pressed for publication of Emily's poems after coming upon her manuscripts, she had already obeyed Emily's instructions by destroying all letters to her sister that she found in the house—a decision she came to regret. Lavinia championed her brilliant sister's literary recognition, recruiting first Susan and then Mabel Loomis Todd to prepare poems for print. Todd, an aspiring writer and wife of an Amherst College professor, had known Emily Dickinson only indirectly. Lavinia's choice was more than usually awkward because Mabel was also Austin's mistress; their affair continued until Austin's death in 1895 and complicated publication of Emily's manuscripts until the middle of the twentieth century. Lavinia pressed Todd to keep up a flow of publication, urged family members and friends to make letters from Emily available to

her, and delighted in positive reviews. Her possessiveness about her rights as her sister's closest family member and sole legal heir, however, brought friction within the family—not only with Susan but also with a cousin's widow who ventured to print reminiscences in newspapers. Lavinia's letter to Caroline Healey Dall, objecting to the widow's conjectures about Emily's disappointment in love and their father's cruelty, shows her stalwart resistance to the inevitable force of readers' curiosity. After Austin's death, a permanent rupture developed between Lavinia and Mabel over land he had wanted to bequeath to the Todds. Lavinia brought suit to recover property whose transfer she claimed she had never authorized, and the case resulted in a painfully public trial. When Lavinia prevailed in court, Mabel abandoned her editorial efforts but held on to poem manuscripts that were in her possession. Even then, the ailing Lavinia persevered in having a friend copy out more of her sister's poems with apparent hopes of getting them into print. Those poems were eventually published by her niece in *Further Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1929), ironically subtitled "Withheld from Publication by her Sister Lavinia."

In contrast, Austin's letter to Higginson just before the 1890 *Poems* appeared betrays his ambivalence about publicizing his more gifted sister at all: "Whether it was—on the whole—advisable to publish is yet with me, a question." When early books were printed, Lavinia and Austin could not even agree on an acceptable visual image of their sister, rejecting the daguerreotype taken in her teens and settling for a childhood group portrait of the three siblings. An undated sketch included in this book bears Emily Dickinson's name in what appears to be her brother's penmanship but got passed over for publication. Austin, however, provided information to Todd about his increasingly celebrated sister and sometimes accompanied her when she lectured.

In her obituary tribute for her gifted sister-in-law in the 18 May 1886 *Springfield Republican*, Susan hinted at her own experiences as one of those friends "turn[ing] love to larceny" who had ventured to make a few of Emily's poems available for anonymous publication during her lifetime. The lesson she had drawn from her efforts reinforced impressions prevailing for many years that Emily shrank from publication. Susan shared with Higginson in 1890 her reasons for protecting her friend's privacy even after death: Emily "hated her peculiarities and shrank from any notice of them as a nerve from the knife," she reported; "I sometimes shudder when I

think of the world reading her thoughts minted in deep heart-broken convictions." Yet Susan treasured an extensive collection of poems and notes sent over the years to her and her children; she had read aloud from them to friends during Emily's lifetime and, after Emily's death, had planned to assemble some for private printing and distribution. As she wrote Higginson, "The volume would have been rather more full, and varied, than yours as I should have used many bits of her prose-passages from letters quite surpassing the correspondence of Goethe Gunderodi[e] with Bettine—quaint bits to my children &c." Correspondence between Susan, Austin, and William Hayes Ward demonstrates, however, how Lavinia's determination to control all printing of Emily's writings prevented Susan from pursuing a task that her daughter took up only after Susan herself died in 1913.

Even though Lavinia and Austin entrusted their sister's literary debut to Todd and Higginson, it would be hard to exaggerate their influence on what was said—and not said—about the poet. Todd knew virtually nothing about this gifted woman beyond what Lavinia and Austin told her. Higginson had corresponded with the poet since 1862 but visited with her just twice. He published his impressions of her in his 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, while also adhering to the conduct codes of a gentleman who tried to support rather than contest the family's efforts. Moreover, as Austin commented to Mabel after Higginson published an essay on his correspondence with the poet, "Emily definitely posed in those letters." Higginson and Todd represented the poet in the light that pleased her siblings. They stressed the family's distinction, its prominence in Amherst, her father's public service, and Emily's quiet but not unhappy life. If readers emerged from the poems speculating on a love tragedy and if neighbors indulged in gossip about Edward Dickinson's interference with his daughter's happiness, it was not because of editorial encouragement. Aside from Susan's obituary tribute, Austin, Lavinia, and Susan never printed anything on Emily or included anything that substantively characterized her in their letters.

Some of Emily's notable friends who could have complemented the family's representations died earlier than she: Samuel Bowles, Josiah Gilbert Holland, Charles Wadsworth, Otis Phillips Lord, and Helen Hunt Jackson. Emily Fowler Ford reported that Holland told her Dickinson's "poems are too ethereal for publication." In contrast, Jackson urged Dickinson to publish and in one letter even offered to serve as her literary executor. Eliz-



abeth Holland, a dear friend who survived Emily, never wrote a memoir. As a result of these silences, virtually everything the public came to know about Emily Dickinson until Bianchi's publications in the 1920s came from her first editors. The most important of these was Higginson's 1890 "Preface" (a distilled version of the longer 25 September 1890 essay he had published in the *Christian Union*). From either of these sources, readers could learn little beyond the dates of the poet's birth and death, her father's prominence, and the fact that she was "a recluse by temperament and habit." Nor did admirers learn much of a personal nature from Todd's November 1890 introductory essay in *Home Magazine*, although Todd reported a bit more about Emily's seclusion, her habit of dressing in white, and her thoughtfulness toward friends. The essential message of Todd's 1891 preface and her frequent lectures remained the same: namely, that Emily "had tried society and the world, and found them lacking. She was not an invalid, and she lived in seclusion from no love-disappointment. Her life was the normal blossoming of a nature introspective to a high degree, whose best thought could not exist in pretence."

Finally, among the persistent myths surrounding Dickinson, it has long been believed that her poetry was roundly criticized when first published. There is some truth in this assumption, but it is tempered by the fact that critics of the 1890s judged by different criteria than earlier or later readers. Consequently, readers and critics of following generations hear their condemnations and praise in different balance than may have been assumed then. Her poetry, initially, had to face the world's judgment according to the critical standards of the 1890s, although within a few decades many assumptions by which her first editors expected poetry to be judged came under attack. Those standards were already in dispute during this decade, as demonstrated by the variety of responses to her poems. Many critics (notably Andrew Lang) berated Dickinson's lack of rhyme and metrical consistency in their zeal to maintain strict standards of formal control, while others judged her in terms later associated with modernism. William Dean Howells's praise of her poems as "each a compassed whole, a sharply finished point" in his influential January 1891 review for *Harper's* and Bliss Carman's 1896 recognition of Dickinson's consonantal rhymes as justified experimentation show that standards were no longer monolithic but evolving.

During the decade of Emily Dickinson's literary debut, more discoveries