



CRITICISM

VOLUME

131

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 131

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism

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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xi

Emily Dickinson 1830-1886	1
<i>American poet</i>	
John Wieners 1934-2002	168
<i>American poet, playwright, and critic</i>	
Wolfram von Eschenbach c. 1170-c. 1220	214
<i>German poet</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 311

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 431

PC-131 Title Index 435

Emily Dickinson

1830-1886

American poet.

For further information on Dickinson's life and works, see *PC*, Volume 1.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important poets of nineteenth-century America, Dickinson produced nearly 1,800 individual poems, almost all of them published posthumously. Her poems are all untitled and are generally referenced either by first line or by number as they appear in one of two twentieth-century collections—the 1960 version edited by Thomas H. Johnson or the 1998 Variorum Edition edited by R. W. Franklin.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts; her father, Edward, was a successful lawyer; her mother, Emily (Norcross) was an invalid. Dickinson and her siblings—older brother William Austin and younger sister Lavinia Norcross—attended the one-room schoolhouse in Amherst, after which they entered the Amherst Academy. The school's curriculum emphasized the sciences—subjects that would later inform much of Dickinson's poetry. Beginning in 1847, Dickinson spent a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where she was influenced by New England Puritanism; religious themes would also become prominent in her writing, although she herself was a lifelong agnostic. She returned to her family's home after her studies were completed and rarely left for the remainder of her life—with the exception of a few brief trips to Washington, D.C., Boston, and Philadelphia. There have been a number of rumors that during one of her trips to Philadelphia, she fell in love with a married minister, and the result of this unfortunate affair led to her withdrawal from social life. Her reclusiveness, which seemed to intensify over the years, along with her penchant for dressing in all white, earned her a reputation as an eccentric. She reportedly refused to leave her room to greet visitors and the relationships she maintained with others were conducted almost exclusively via correspondence. Dickinson's father died in 1874, after

which she spent the next eight years caring for her mother until her mother's death in 1882. Dickinson suffered from kidney disease and died in 1886.

MAJOR WORKS

Dickinson's poetry consists of brief lyrics—only seven of them were published during her lifetime, and these appeared anonymously and in some cases, against her wishes. Her work covered a wide range of subject matter, including the appreciation of nature, matters of love, religion, and most especially, death. She experimented with rhyme schemes and developed a highly idiosyncratic system of punctuation and capitalization—for which she was often criticized. In addition her work is filled with complex allusions and symbols, so that discovering the “meaning” of her poems has long been a preoccupation of scholars.

Collections of her work began to appear after her death, starting in 1890 with *Poems of Emily Dickinson*; a second series followed a year later, and a third series in 1896. In 1914, *The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime* appeared and in 1935, *Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson*. A three-volume collection titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, was published in 1955, and *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, also edited by Johnson, appeared in 1960. R. W. Franklin edited and published *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition* in three volumes in 1998. The *Letters of Emily Dickinson* was published in two volumes in 1894, and a two-volume edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Franklin, was published in 1981.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The focus of much of the scholarly work on Dickinson's writing is the relationship between her reclusive personal life and the thematics and stylistics of her poetry. The unconventional formal features of Dickinson's work are well known, as Mary Cappello explains: “In her efforts to perfect an awkward idiom, Dickinson relies on near and off rhyme; on dashes like sudden trap doors for you to fall through; on identity mis-taken.” According to Cappello, Dickinson was a “socially awkward poet known for her brilliant

sublimation of debilitating shyness into an aesthetic of reticence." Shira Wolosky (see Further Reading) has also studied Dickinson's reclusive life and is less concerned with its causes than with its implications for her work. "Dickinson's poetry," claims Wolosky, "provides a record of her responses to a world she found at times alluring but of which she ultimately disapproved as deeply flawed and indeed alarming." Seth Archer believes that the cause of Dickinson's social problems was what today would be diagnosed as panic disorder, and with that in mind, he has studied the many poems she wrote addressing the "terror" as she called it; he believes that her panic attacks affected her work in a positive way. According to Archer, "At its worst, Dickinson's panic may have kept her from writing completely; and yet in its wake the poet hit her stride" and produced a number of poems "which, taken together, comprise a batch of the best verse ever composed in America."

Common themes of Dickinson's poetry are nature and war. She has occasionally been criticized for her approach to nature in her poetry; however, Scott Knickerbocker argues against two common critical misconceptions regarding her treatment of nature. According to the critic, "both interpretations—that Dickinson sentimentalizes nature and that she uses natural imagery merely to metaphorize her skepticism—deny her active perception and consideration of a physically real natural world." Benjamin Friedlander discusses Dickinson's war poetry, noting that her work has recently been included in three different anthologies of American war poetry, which he maintains "signals a new consensus regarding her work's place in the canon of Civil War writing." Friedlander believes that it is essential for understanding Dickinson's war poetry to take into account "the discordant character of her response as a whole, a response that varies markedly both in its attitudes about the war and in the modes of writing with which those attitudes are expressed."

Although Dickinson wrote about religious themes in her poetry, she was never able to get past her own doubts and embrace a personal faith; in fact, she was a lifelong agnostic. This aspect of her writing has been examined by Siobhan Phillips, who acknowledges that "Dickinson moved among the various doctrines available to her," in writing about religion, but believes that in the poem "A word made Flesh," the poet was very specifically employing the language of Trinitarian doctrine. William Franke examines Dickinson's "evidently idiosyncratic religious faith," contending that her poetry "is best understood as a form of negative theology." The poet's use of whiteness and the word "white" in many of her poems has been examined by Wesley King, who notes that in her later years, Dickinson wore only white clothes. He argues that her

use of whiteness was not connected to the usual interpretation of white as a sign of "racial power, sexual purity, and class privilege," but that she "destabilizes whiteness by severing the authority of the visible sign from the signifying effects of language."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- Poems of Emily Dickinson* 1890
Poems by Emily Dickinson, second series 1891
Poems by Emily Dickinson, third series 1896
The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime 1914
Further Poems of Emily Dickinson 1929
Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson 1935
Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson 1945
The Poems of Emily Dickinson. 3 vols. [edited by Thomas H. Johnson] 1955
The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson [edited by Thomas H. Johnson] 1960
The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Variorum Edition. 3 vols. [edited by R. W. Franklin] 1998

Other Major Works

- Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. (letters) 1894
The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson. 2 vols. (manuscripts) 1981

CRITICISM

H. Jordan Landry (essay date 2004)

SOURCE: Landry, H. Jordan. "The Touched, the Tasted, and the Tempted: Lesbianizing the Triangles of Puritan Conversion Narratives in Emily Dickinson." *Women's Studies* 33, no. 7 (2004): 875-906.

[In the following essay, Landry discusses the influence of lesbian desire on Dickinson's work.]

So sweet and still, and Thee, oh Susie, what need I
 more, to make my heaven whole?

Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to
 bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss,
 and whisper Good bye again.

I have thought of it all day, Susie, and I fear of but little else; and when I was gone to meeting it filled my mind so full, I could not find a *chink* to put the worthy pastor; when he said, "Our Heavenly Father," I said, "Oh Darling Sue"; when he read the 100th Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over to myself, and Susie, when they sang—it would have made you laugh to hear one little voice, piping to the departed. I made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you had gone, while the rest of the choir were singing Hallelujahs. (*Letters* 1:201; ltr. 88)

Emily Dickinson in letter to Sue Gilbert, late April 1852

The first that I remember that ever I found anything of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words 1 Timothy 1.17. "Now unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever, Amen." As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being, a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a being that was, and how happy I should be if I might enjoy God and be rapt up to God in Heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in Him. I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to prayer to pray to God that I might enjoy Him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do, with a new sort of affection. (1:383)

Jonathan Edwards, Personal Narrative, 1765

Each of these epigraphs describes a conversion inspired by the words of a writer who shares the same sex as the reader-turned-writer. Each posits the fulfillment of homoerotic desire—the longing for a merging between two same-sex bodies—as the telos of experience. And each figures a triangle of desire which includes the "I," another of the same sex as the "I," and a male writer/speaker of Puritan discourse—a male's sermons, psalms, and hymns in Dickinson's case and Paul's letter to Timothy in Jonathan Edwards' own. It is all these similarities perhaps that make the primary difference striking: Edwards describes his conversion to Christ, Dickinson her conversion to Sue Gilbert. This difference unravels another. The Puritan literary tradition in which divines describe their embrace of Christ in sexualized terms authorizes Jonathan Edwards' language. Yet, no such discursive history describing a woman's conversion to another woman anticipates Emily Dickinson's language.¹ Edwards' experience of desire for God, evoked through a male writer's language memorialized in scripture, is an acceptance of and adherence to Puritan discourse. By contrast, Dickinson's experience of desire for Sue, induced through Sue's own private, personalized language to her in a letter, is a resistance of such discourse. Puritan discursive tradition makes the

ultimate model of desire a version of male-for-male love; the male writer's or pastor's love of Christ is the imitative model for all congregants who wish to approach conversion, an idea exemplified by Edwards' modeling of his love of God on Paul's.² Rather than passively accepting her outsidership from this homosocial paradigm though, Dickinson forges another homosocial model of desire: beside the male pastor's sermon articulating praise of and desire for a man, namely Christ, Dickinson juxtaposes a woman—herself—publicizing her praise of and desire for another woman, Sue.

Dickinson consistently takes issue with the triangles underlying Puritan discourse even as she writes of lesbian desire. In order to understand Dickinson's revision of Puritan erotic triangles, the historical section of this essay will analyze the three normative triangulations operating within Puritan discourse: male Puritan divine, male congregant, and Christ; promiscuous woman, faithful husband (Christ), and illicit male lover; and Christ, his father God, and the "bride" congregant. Both in letters and poems, Dickinson co-opts the triangular structures of desire imprisoned within Puritan narrative to resound the sexualized desire so rife in those geometries. Further, Dickinson's early writing critiques the triangle embedded within Puritan conversion narratives by suggesting they urge an imitative love of Christ, which, once internalized by the woman in the process of conversion, functions as a constraining force that delimits imaginative play. Because it imitates, this love is antithetical to the generation of revisionary poetic tropes and, so, reifies normative ways of seeing. According to Dickinson, such a conversion introduces the convert into a perceptual system structured by an idealization of both male bodies and the desires for those bodies.

As her own use of the triangle evolves, Dickinson strives to interrupt this traditional mode of perception by imaging the triangular structure anew as women-dominated in order to represent an alternative type of conversion, namely, a lesbian one. I describe this desire as lesbian precisely because it draws from and transforms the homoerotic desire structuring Puritan discourse to describe relationships between women. Due to her lesbian desire, Dickinson appropriates the skeletal structure of the Puritan narrative of conversion but, then, so revolutionizes that structure by redressing it in the flesh, bodies, and desires of women that it functions to a very different purpose: foregrounding a bodily conversion to woman-for-woman love. At the height of her use of the woman-dominated triangle, Dickinson's theory of desire is a theory of poetry and perception: to introduce a different desire into narrative is to topple existing forms in favor of revitalized ones and, simultaneously, to bring about

different ways of seeing. And all these theories for Dickinson, hinge on a woman's desire for another woman's body. Because Dickinson views lesbian desire as never having been embedded in conventional narrative form, she believes it will alter the foundational forms of poetry, from the conception of the muse to symbols to genre, and, hence, to a deconstruction of inherited modes of perceiving the female body.

THE TRIANGLES OF DESIRE IN PURITAN
CONVERSION NARRATIVES

To more fully understand Dickinson's refiguration of triangular structures, we must first examine the triangles of Puritan conversion narratives. Within these triangles, men's desire in relationship to women fluctuates according to the needs of the individual male rhetorician.³ The desirability/undesirability of the woman within the triangle serves variable ends within Puritan sermons and treatises on conversion—it promotes conversion, it discourages nonconversion, it idealizes God and Christ, and it emphasizes the abject status of humans. So, at one moment, woman is the undesirable whore rightfully ignored by her husband for seeking sexual relations outside marriage; at another, she is touted as the desirable virgin—the unsullied bride—granted by God the father to his son in marriage; and, finally she is the obstacle who must be overcome in the forging of an ideal all-male triangulation. In whatever way women are represented, one major commonality among these diverse triangulations still remains: the affirmation of men's desire, superiority, bodily desirability, and phallicism is achieved through women's sexual devaluation in the triangle relative to men. To sum it all up in another way, male power is given essence through the representation of men's regulatory reaction towards women's sexuality within the triangles.

One of the most reiterated triangles in Puritan rhetoric concerning conversion is the threesome of adulterous woman, loyal husband, and illicit lover. In this geometric design, women are cast as wanderers in a highly sexualized body that requires surveillance, as in this passage from Thomas Watson's sermon "Heaven Taken By Storm" (1669): "It is the note of an Harlot; she is seldom at home, *Prov 7.11, 12. Her feet abide not in her house: now she is without, now in the streets*" (qtd. in Watkins 10). The implicit triangle in this quote is the harlot who is faithless to the male's house, the father or husband who owns the house along with the "harlot" who should be in it, and the bevy of unlawful male lovers available outside the house. On a more literal note, as historian Lyle Koehler points out, in 1641, one Puritan minister "actually suggested hanging any maiden who allowed a lover to have

sexual intercourse with her in her father's house" (31). In minister Thomas Shepard's world of analogy, the image of a promiscuous woman was erected as the ultimate emblem for the faithless: "That a false, double, treacherous, disloyal heart to Christ can not expect any thing it comes for unto Christ. As it is with a woman, that others do not, yet her husband knows that she is fallen in league with some other man, he will be strange to her and will not do anything for her" (*Parable 59*). Such a triangular configuration is legion within Puritan discourse. It urges a denigration of women along with a regulation of their behavior.

While failure to regulate the self in preparation for conversion was emblemized as an adulterous woman, successful regulation of the self in conversion was repeatedly imaged as a bride being married to Christ by God his father. This particular configuration of desire was most prevalent in the rhetoric surrounding the covenant of the Lord's Supper, a covenant that traditionally demanded movement through an original moment of conversion. According to Edward Taylor, the convert needed to approach the Lord's Supper undefiled, symbolically wearing a "wedden [sic] garment" (29) of bright white in anticipation of the covenant when "Christ hath his marriage onto the Soul; he espouseth it, and promiseth it marriage, and God declares it that he is married onto His people" (17). According to Amanda Porterfield, Christ's marriage to the bride makes women the models for all saints, male and female (3-39). I am suggesting though that this analogy works to denigrate women, by creating a hierarchy of love in which Christ, and, therefore, men generally, will always rank above women. This covenant implicitly prohibits earthly bonds and purely physical fleshy bodies; it glorifies instead an idealized psychical bridegroom who comes to fill the convert with his love and body. Given this emphasis on the imaginary in the covenant of the Lord's Supper, I argue that the threesome founding the conversion experience and the Lord's Supper—God, Christ, and the "bride" congregant—functions to posit the phallus as the supreme sign. The bride's purpose in the triangle is to confirm through contrast God's and Christ's possession of the phallus and her own lack of it.

While for women, Christ as love object offered merely another version of heterosexual marriage, for men such an image posited an escape from heterosexual marriage and women altogether. Puritan male divines frequently figured their spiritual birth in the moment another male divine inspired them to worship Jesus. Male ministers often vitalized men's sense of their erotic union with God.⁴ At times, this male-for-male worship actually champions the male's abandonment of his wife in pursuit of an erotically charged homosocial union with God. The most popular example

of this literary strategy is the Christian's pilgrimage to the Celestial City in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). In starting out on his adventure, Christian neglects his sinful wife and children in order to enter a triangulation of himself, Christ, and another male pilgrim, first Faith and later Hope.⁵ What D. H. Lawrence wrote about Walt Whitman in 1924 is equally true of Puritan male divines: "For the great mergers, woman at last becomes inadequate. For those who love to extremes. Woman is inadequate for the last merging. So the next step is the merging of man-to-man love. And this is on the brink of death" (178). Such "man-to-man" merging renders women invisible, reducing them to sullied bodies that must be overcome and/or escaped in the achievement of a purified erotic union with God.

DICKINSON STUDIES AND LESBIAN DESIRE

Just as Dickinson counters Puritanism's obsession with man-to-man merging, a particular strain of Emily Dickinson studies challenges the emphasis in Dickinson studies on Emily Dickinson's supposed lost male love by focusing on female-to-female merging. The lesbian accounts of Dickinson, which begin with Rebecca Patterson in the 1950s, are precisely what allow me to tell my own story about Dickinson's lesbianization of Puritan rhetoric.⁶ My argument is both indebted to and extends the line of criticism that acknowledges how Dickinson's desire for women plays a fundamental role in shaping her poetry. Thanks to the considerable critical work done in this area, I can take as givens the ideas that: women and lesbian desire are central to Dickinson's aesthetics; Susan Gilbert inspires much of Dickinson's poetic process; the female body and lesbian desire translate into a symbolic system in Dickinson's poetry; and the critic's own historical and ideological positioning often render him/her blind to the lesbian aspects of Dickinson's work. Both individually and as a group, Rebecca Patterson, Vivian Pollak, Paula Bennett, Martha Nell Smith, Lillian Faderman, Adrienne Rich, and Ellen Louise Hart have launched a formidable criticism of patriarchal and heterosexist modes of reading by unveiling the play of lesbian meanings underlying Emily Dickinson's writing.⁷

As indebted as my work is to the writers listed above and as much as I admire their groundbreaking research, I also take issue with the structure underlying the major works of biographical criticism on Dickinson's lesbian desire.⁸ For Bennett, Pollak, and Smith, biographical criticism is the primary aim. This tack almost necessarily leads critics to approach Dickinson's writing as a vehicle by which to fill in the biographical gaps in her life. Out of this shared emphasis emerges a shared narrative. Thus, her writ-

ing maps her maturation process, sexual development, and improvement of her poetics. As it is conducted in Emily Dickinson studies, biographical criticism conflates these three forms of development. It seeks the exact moment of a shift from immature to mature on Emily Dickinson's part (happening somewhere between 1855 and 1861 depending on the critic) and encodes those qualities aligned with maturity as positive and with immaturity as negative (Bennett 63; Pollak 133-156, 157-189; Smith 160-174). The problem with this strategy is that, ultimately, Dickinson's expressions of carnal lesbian desire and gender play in her early letters are dismissed as immature writing, while Dickinson's articulations of heterosexual desire (for Bennett and Pollak), lesbian psychic fantasy (for Smith), and femininity (for Bennett and Pollak) are coded as mature writing.⁹

Two other repeated assumptions within this line of criticism are that Dickinson uses androcentric and heterosexual models to express her identity and desire. Pollak's argument stresses that Dickinson's desire for women led her toward identification with men and performance of masculinity. Dickinson becomes an imitator of her brother Austin in her desire for Sue (72). Bennett takes a different yet related tack. In Bennett's version of the story, Dickinson tries to compete with Austin and takes on a male voice, but, ultimately, finds that she cannot sustain this performance of masculinity. The reason for this supposed failure is the body itself. Her theory casts Dickinson as developing her poetic voice as well as her lesbian desire only through recognition of her own castration (*My Life* 152-153). Smith shakes up this model by showing how, in her writing to Sue, Dickinson represents both herself and Susan as, at times, masculine and, at other times, feminine. Yet, Smith insists on defining this gender play as inspired by "heterosexual discourse," presumably because one of the two women always plays the feminine to the other's masculine, thus, maintaining the standard masculine/feminine binary thought to structure heterosexuality (116). Such an encoding hints that the only form of gendered and sexualized embodiment validly defined as lesbian is one feminine woman loving another feminine woman.

Given Pollak's, Bennett's, and Smith's representations of Dickinson, important questions remain to be answered about Emily Dickinson's vision of the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, gender and sexuality, and female and male masculinity: Why would Dickinson model her version of homosexuality on a heterosexual binary of masculine and feminine, when by all accounts, she was well aware of how this binary constrained women? Why would she allow Austin to dictate the form of gender she embodied—masculine for Pollak and feminine for

Bennett—if, as these critics argue, gender was a crucial aspect of her poetics? Wouldn't that position Dickinson, despite her conscious awareness of the need for creative originality in her poetry, as allowing her gender, desire, and poetry to be dictated by the male and the heterosexual? What did she imagine was the relationship between masculinity and lesbianism? In the absence of an acknowledged homosocial discourse, how did Dickinson move to a homosocial model of creativity and passion?

Queer theory offers a way to shift the ground of assumptions currently informing the readings of lesbian meanings in Dickinson precisely because it exposes the conventional maturity/immaturity binary as a central component of the medical and psychoanalytic discourses that have been employed to prove the pathological nature of queers and their desire (Rubin 12-18; Roof 91-103, 210, 212).¹⁰ Thereby, queer theory illustrates the historically constructed nature of all such claims. The danger of basing critical work on the medical and psychoanalytic models that label homosexuals immature in terms of sexual development is that the very foundation of the criticism will repeat a heteronormative model even if the literary critic has other goals in mind. By relying on queer theory, which assumes that lesbian desire and gender play are subversive in positive ways, I begin from quite another standpoint.¹¹ I view Dickinson's own experience of lesbian desire and attraction to female masculinity as creating a need to forge alternative images and structural forms to express the reality of her experience. I suggest Dickinson fully understood that the nature of her desire could revise dominant narrative forms and disrupt conventional writing techniques. In fact, she recognized that her experience of the body, in gender and sexual terms, could not be conveyed to others without just such revisions.

The evidence for my alternative readings of gender and desire in Dickinson lies in the early letters and the later poems that build on these letters. These writings reveal Dickinson's conscious commitment to using female masculinity and lesbian desire to disrupt conventional writing techniques. I think that the early letters reveal Dickinson's poetic theories, which become integrated later into the core of her poetry. Because lesbian criticism on Dickinson has insisted, at various times, that carnality, lesbianism, the body, and letters unaccompanied by poetry must be left behind in order to achieve maturity, the early letters dated prior to 1861 for Bennett and Pollak and 1855 for Smith have not been read as revealing of her lesbian poetics or aesthetics (Smith 163-164; Bennett 64; Pollak 59-82). Indeed, whenever they are quoted within

this line of criticism, the meaning is viewed as self-evident and even literal. I will read these letters as the very place Dickinson experimented with critiquing and revising the erotic triangles of Puritan conversion. And I will show how these letters unveil Dickinson's theory that female masculinity and lesbian desire challenge both the heterosexual and homoerotic narratives grounding Puritan rhetoric.

BABY DYKES: EMBRYONIC LESBIAN TRIANGLES
IN DICKINSON'S LETTERS

Nascent in the letters to her female friends is Dickinson's construction of women-dominated triangles. In these, a pastor, Christ, or God take up one node of the triangle, while Dickinson herself and her female friend to whom she writes occupy the other two nodes. The imagination of this triangulation evolves in response to historical events, most notably the many Puritan revivals that swept the Connecticut Valley during Dickinson's childhood and adolescence.¹² During these revivals, Amherst youths face a potential intensification of their feelings about conversion; they are passionately urged to undergo a religious transformation bringing them into relation to Christ and are assailed everywhere with others' successful negotiation of the conversion process. Even though Dickinson does not convert, she too is immersed in Puritanism, so much so, Richard Sewall claims "[s]he could no more escape [Puritanism], . . . than she could escape breathing the air of her native Amherst" (20). Through letters received from Abiah Root, a female friend, Dickinson appears to have been privy to her friend's experience of conversion, since Dickinson's own letters written to her in reply suggest earlier revelations made by Abiah. Significantly, in her response to Abiah's account of conversion, Dickinson originates a woman-centered triangular relationship, which takes the form of herself, Abiah, and Christ. These triangles are meant to play off of and revise the triangles within Puritan conversion narratives. In her construction of the Abiah-Christ and Dickinson-Christ points of the triangle, Dickinson articulates a conscious critique of those Puritan triangles.

One critique is that the apotheosis of Christ as love object and the position of women in the triangle vis-à-vis Christ serve regulatory purposes. This regulation is aimed at women, their bodies, and their desires. Such a reading overlaps with Joanna Yin's argument that Dickinson takes issue with the semiotic structure of Calvinism, which she recognizes as founded on a "dichotomy, dominant-man/subordinate woman," and champions a questioning of Christ's supremacy within Puritan rhetoric in order to revalue women (72). My

argument extends Yin's by focusing on desire. In my view, Dickinson launches a critique against the Puritan triangle for shaping women's desire as heterosexual to the exclusion of woman-for-woman love. She acknowledges the relational dynamics of Puritan triangles that represent women as geared towards men sexually and emotionally, but she revises such triangles by touting the potentialities of the Abiah-Dickinson points of the triangle. Dickinson images a playful celebration of rogue capabilities, an indulgence in spontaneity, laughter, and play. Aversion to Christ's powers of regulation and desire for Abiah's powers of emotional evocation structure the earliest of Dickinson's triangles.

In Dickinson's version of Abiah's conversion, Abiah must conform, even deform, her imagination in order to elicit Christ's sanction: "You [Abiah] are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom—perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter . . . You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I'm afraid he don't love me *any!*" (*Letters* 1:104; ltr. 39). This excerpt figures regulation of the female self as a preemptive strike at an organic body ("nipping in the bud") that has not yet flourished. This death-like regulation is "learn[ed]" by the female convert as a requisite strategy by which to generate "*more*" "*love*" in the overseer, "Christ Jesus." To put it more bluntly, only "proper" repressive behavior in the female convert produces love in the male authority figure, here Christ. While Diane Gabrielson Scholl argues that Dickinson's fascicles together reflect the pattern of Calvinist conversion narratives, particularly the usual fear and anxiety over conversion, I think that Dickinson's early letters at least testify to her mockery of such a pattern of self-abnegation (202-224). Dickinson's spin on Christ's regulative power over women's imaginations in the triangle unearths at the conscious level the constraining role the Christ-woman position plays in Puritan triangles generally. While a number of critics, including Karl Keller and Scholl, have set Dickinson within a Puritan frame to affirm her conservative enactment of womanhood, my own purpose for doing so is to demonstrate her departure not only from Puritanism, but also from its allied construction of women (Keller 21-37; Scholl 202-224). Thus, I argue that Dickinson portrays herself as operating outside Puritan regulation of women. In this triangular relationship, Dickinson imagines herself as excluded from a bond with Jesus; he refuses her "*any*" love due to her rogue status. To be a rogue in Dickinson's terms is to resist an interiorization into the body of self-regulation so that she can allow "fancies" to

"blossom," and, like Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge, enjoy their fruit. This metaphor gestures towards the imaginative flight central to poetic production. Dickinson must resist Christ's regulation in order to protect the viability of her imagination.

This opposition between the undesirability of Christ's love and the desirability of a woman's love rewrites the sexual dynamics of Puritan conversion triangles in which women are judged based on their sexual desirability to men. Dickinson inverts these triangles so that men are valued for their ability/inability to generate creativity within the female self. What Claudia Yukman sees as Dickinson's drive to compete with Christ due to her jealousy of his seeming ability to rob her of her friends may also explain Dickinson's desire to devalue Christ within the triangle (83). Consistently, the triangles of desire created by Dickinson at once cast God and Christ as regulators unable to evoke creativity, and cast women as roguish muses, as in this letter to Abiah Root:

Three here instead of *one*—would'nt [sic] it scare them? A curious trio, part earthly and part spiritual two of us—the other all heaven, and no earth. *God* is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right tho'ts [sic]. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good, and he knows every one of my struggles. He looks very gloriously, and everything bright seems dull beside him, and I dont [sic] dare to look directly at him for fear I shall die. . . . Then *you* are here—dressed in that quiet black gown and cap—that funny little cap I used to laugh at you about, and you dont [sic] appear to be thinking about anything in particular, . . . you seem aware that I'm writing you, and are amused I should think at any such friendly manifestation when you are already present. *Success* however even in making a fool of one's-self is'nt [sic] to be despised, so I shall persist in writing, and you may in laughing at me. . . . The trinity winds up with me, as you may have surmised, and I certainly would'nt [sic] be at the far end but for civility to you.

(*Letters* 1:86; ltr. 31)

This letter adumbrates the construction of trinities in later poems in which a woman's darkness, laughter, and roguishness initiates creative production. As in the earlier passage, the male deity, here God, is limited to one symbolic role: he represents an authority figure by which the individual subject feels surveilled and judged. For Dickinson, any circuit of gestural and relational exchange with God is non-existent; the relationship instead is imaged as a one-way route in which God "look[s]" into her interior, weighs her "right tho'ts," and judges her accordingly, but in which she does not "dare to look directly at him for fear I might die." In this triangle, the male's hierarchical