

About Dickinson's "Fascicles"

Although almost all of Emily Dickinson's poems remained unpublished during her lifetime, she did engage in a private kind of self-publication from about 1858 to 1864. During those years, she made copies of more than eight hundred of her poems, gathered them into forty groups, and bound each of these together with string into different booklets. In addition, she also sometimes sent a friend a copy of one of these booklets of poems, despite the fact that there is no evidence that she showed them in bound form to anyone. After Dickinson had died, her sister, Lavinia discovered the forty booklets, as well as copies of nearly 400 poems arranged in booklets, but unbound; miscellaneous fair copies; semifinal drafts; and worksheet drafts written on odds and ends of paper.

Lavinia, who knew her sister wrote poems, was determined to get them published. After a complicated process of seeking for editorial help from her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson; Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an astronomy professor at Amherst College (and mistress of the Dickinson sisters' brother, Austin); Lavinia finally contacted T.W. Higginson. With the help of this figure of literary prominence with whom the poet had corresponded, Todd selected and edited several hundred poems from the mixed cache discovered by Lavinia, then saw them through their publication in the three editions of the 1890s.

In these early editions and those appeared in the following years, many of the editors arranged the poems according to their principles, but did not take Dickinson's arrangement of fascicles into concern. Moreover, during the complex publishing history of the poems, the fascicles were cast into disarray. Finally, in 1955, Thomas H. Johnson attempted to identify the poet's original arrangement, and the original arrangement of the poet was restored at last in 1981 with the publication of Franklin's *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*—the first time that facsimiles of the 40 fascicles were made available to readers in the way she assembled them.

By reconstructing the fascicles, Franklin introduced a new era in Dickinson scholarship and an important new question to be confronted by her readers: what, if any, organizing principle or principles did the poet have in mind when she created them. Furthermore, the forty fascicles include most of Emily Dickinson's poetic production between 1858 and 1864, and some proposed they are random gatherings, that as she wrote the poems, she bound them chronologically to provide some degree of order. However, others argued that one or all of the booklets focus upon a particular aesthetic or thematic principle. For one thing, in the most recent publication of the book, *Choosing Not Choosing*, by Sharon Cameron, had presented strong evidence that Emily Dickinson assembled the fascicles deliberately rather than chronologically. As this Cameron points out, some fascicles are composed of poems that Dickinson copied in different years, and there are even evidences of which she had left a verso or half-sheet blank after she had inserted additional sheets to a fascicle she completed.