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Reading Dickinson: Bolts, Hounds, the Variorum, and Fascicle 39

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reading Dickinson: Bolts, Hounds, the Variorum, and Fascicle 39

John Gerlach (bio)

More than eight hundred of what is now a corpus of about eighteen hundred Dickinson poems were originally bound in groups of four to six folded sheets sewn at the left margin, but early editors—Todd and Higginson; Bingham; Bianchi—ignored these groupings, scrambling them. Thomas Johnson began to restore the fascicles, but he chose not to rely on them uniformly to organize the Variorum. Even Ralph Franklin, who completed the restoration by matching pin and water marks, stains, and stationery, regarded the fascicles as workbooks, not as consciously created collections. Since Franklin first discussed the fascicles in 1967, however, critics have treated individual fascicles as intentionally ordered sequences. How then should we read them—as workbooks or as sequences? If they are indeed meaningful sequences, then we must ask to what extent fascicles affect the experience of reading Dickinson.

After testing one fascicle against alternative arrangements of Dickinson's poems, I will suggest that fascicles are designed groupings and that her poems ought therefore to be read in fascicle context. I will also argue, however, that because of the uneven structure of this as well as other fascicles and because of uncertainties about Dickinson's intent, critics need to proceed **[End Page 78]** cautiously; the workshop theory, though beginning to crumble, should not yet be considered entirely demolished.

The physical appearance of the fascicles themselves, Franklin feels, argue against intentional ordering. The poems are untitled, the fascicles are without index, and without a table of contents. Dickinson has added alternative words or phrases, a practice she did not follow when sending poems to friends. Furthermore, when she did package more than one poem, as she did for Higginson, she sent not a fascicle but rather clusters of four or five poems drawn from various fascicles. In Franklin's view, "What started out as a comprehensive record of completed poems, serving as a source for additional copies, broadened to include intermediate stages and became in a sense a continuing workshop where, in producing a new copy for friends or in reading among poems, she could enter the specific poetic process again" (*Manuscript x*).

Working from the order listed in Franklin's 1967 *Editing Emily Dickinson*, however, Ruth Miller claimed: "The form of Emily Dickinson's poetry is a structured series of poems, the rendering of a conflict in stages of perplexity moving from query to response, to new inquiry to another reply, until some level of resolution is achieved" (270). She analyzed only two fascicles in a portion of her book; afterward in a dissertation Arlo Sletto examined five more. In the meantime, Franklin, revising his estimate of the arrangement of poems within several of the fascicles, noted that some of Miller and Sletto's work had been based on incorrect ordering (*Studies* 1). But even after Franklin published the *Manuscript Books* in 1981, stabilizing the arrangement of poems in a slightly different order and arguing that the fascicles were workbooks, critics continued to find patterns. Rosenthal and Gall, who consider Dickinson the forerunner of the modern poetic sequence, contend that an individual fascicle moves "through confusions and ambiguities towards a precarious balance" (10). According to them, Dickinson's work is typical of what would become a norm for a new form of modern poetry: the sequence, an arrangement which is "intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile," particularly suitable for "the needs of modern sensibility" (9). Most recently Sharon Cameron has focused an entire book, **[End Page 79]** *Choosing Not Choosing*, on the fascicles. She argues that the variants, the primary evidence Franklin cites in favor of the workshop theory, are in fact part of Dickinson's strategy of choosing not to choose; the reader is meant to experience "the necessity of choosing between them. . . without access to criteria by which she could make a choice" (41).

Cameron studies the effect of reading selected poems that are proximate or distant within the fascicles, and she concentrates on more complete readings of fascicles 16 and 20. Variants are seen as analogs for the relation of poems themselves within the fascicles. Seen in fascicle contexts, the limits of a...



JOHN GERLACH

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