Emily Dickinson
A Literary Life

Linda Wagner-Martin

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Emily Dickinson

A Literary Life

Linda Wagner-Martin
Frank Borden Hanes Professor of English and Comparative Literature,
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

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For Andrea Wagner Duff
and in the Memory of
Evelyn Welshimer Reiser

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Contents

List of Illustrations

Preface and Acknowledgments

Poetry in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries owes an incalculable debt to Emily Dickinson and her immensely original and revealing poems. As the flood of critical reaction that began midway through the twentieth century showed, Dickinson's work set a nearly unreachable standard for poets in both the United States and the world—the English speaking world and the world of other languages as well. Few constructions of language, either before Dickinson's poems or after, had such power to reach readers, or such enigmatic and evocative force to make readers create significant and individualized meaning.

Categorized as the poet of nature, Dickinson spoke for the simplicity of existence in the untouched, unspoiled natural world. Hailed as the poet of family, she, ironically, wrote seldom about relationships among parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, and cousins. Instead, she gave her reader the poet as *isolato*, as separable intent consciousness, able to perceive—and record—the best or most moving of human interactions. Described as a philosophical poet, Dickinson wrote a great deal about death but very seldom about either organized religion or happiness. Limned as the poet of simple verities, Dickinson yet employed a great amount of allusion and metaphor: a learned woman, she fought consistently for her human right to live in the family home and to benefit from the caretaking available to her there. As an unmarried woman, one who was never gainfully employed, Dickinson also became the prototype for the self-protective woman writer, a person whose love of language and ambition to create great art dominated much of her adult life. It is of Dickinson's mature life, and her daily dedication to her writing, that this study speaks.

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Note on Conventions

Because Emily Dickinson's poems were nearly all unpublished in her lifetime, and because she did not authorize the forms in which the printed poems appeared, there is no secure typography and punctuation. I use Ralph W. Franklin's three-volume variorum edition for all poem numbers, dates, notes, and formats.

I have maintained Dickinson's non-traditional use of the apostrophe, and her unique spellings ("opon" for "upon," for example).

1
Reaching 1850

In the spring of 1850, Amherst, Massachusetts was a thriving if comparatively isolated town of 4000. When the three Dickinson children (Figure 1.1) were growing up there, the village was still reached from nearby communities only by stage which traveled the roads and under the covered bridges from Hadley. A resident of Springfield could have come the 18 miles by train to Northampton; then the stage would take over. Finally, in 1853, the Amherst-Belchertown Railway was completed (Ward *Emily Dickinson's Letters* 31). For all the difficulties of travel, however, the Edward Dickinsons were considered a family that did travel. It was the mark of their prestigious position in the traditional—and traditionally classed—town. Their journeys took them to the eastern coast, to Boston and Philadelphia and, occasionally, to Washington, DC. If they went abroad, which was unlikely, they traveled to England, France, and perhaps Italy: these were the countries they read about in the elite books of the English-speaking world. In effect, such patterns of travel reflected their intellectual interest: the white and educated New Englanders kept themselves surrounded by other white people. While some Amherst families employed African American household help, most residents who hired cooks, laundresses, and yard workers drew from the newly-arrived Irish population (Murray 3, 10).

In the spring of 1850, Emily Dickinson was approaching 20. William (usually called Austin) was already 22, a student at Amherst College; and Lavinia (Vinnie) was 17. Emily had already completed her studies at Amherst Academy, and had gone for most of a year to the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Sometimes her attendance was sporadic because Emily was considered fragile. In a century when deaths from tuberculosis decimated the population (deaths occurred among teenagers as readily as among parents), people who appeared to be frail, or who

Figure 1.1 O.A. Bullard's painting of the three Dickinson children (*Dickinson Room. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University*)

developed serious coughs with colds, were sheltered (Mamunes 3–4). It is thought that 22 percent of deaths in Massachusetts during the mid-nineteenth century came from tuberculosis (Habegger 640–1).

In 1850 Emily was a proud, talented, and (at times) self-satisfied young woman on the edge of adulthood, a woman trained into the dimity convictions of the so-called separate spheres of the nineteenth century. Upper-class women were protected from the hard work that many lower-class women were forced to undertake. Living in the comfort of their fathers' homes (at least until their marriages to equally well placed suitors), these middle- and upper-class women helped with

household tasks, had social lives with other similarly educated young people, and saw the way religious beliefs persuaded good young adults to behave (Kelley Ch 1). While not luxurious, this life of social propriety was coercive. Once Emily had finished her formal education, she realized how codified women's social roles were. As she wrote to Abiah Root, her former classmate from Amherst Academy, "I expect you have a great many prim, starched up young ladies there, who, I doubt not, are perfect models of propriety and good behavior. If they are, don't let your free spirit be chained by them" (LI 13).

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson from early on in her childhood considered herself a free spirit. She also seemed to grasp the role of observer, the role of Other. In the words of Charlotte Nekola, one of the issues in high relief during the mid-nineteenth century was "how to claim self within an ideology of self-denial . . . womanhood was defined as absence of self" (Nekola 148). Emily Dickinson recognized this inherent conflict: being female "hindered rather than fostered the development of ego, voice, and imagination" or, in other words, within the cult of true womanhood, the female imagination was, at times, equated with selfishness (Nekola 149). As a result, Emily looked on at accepted social behaviors—and she often participated in them during her late teens—but she also came to see herself as her father's daughter and Austin's sister: one of a family triumvirate of witty intellectuals. In that role, Emily became almost genderless.

Whether because of her own talents—among them her across-the-board academic competence—or because her parents had already tried to erase the parameters of gender difference for her, Emily felt as if she were Austin's equal. As her letters to him show, once he is away in college and then teaching school, she cajoles, jokes, and exaggerates with the perfect understanding that Austin loves her, as does her father, without making judgments. In the hierarchy of family power, Emily had early on become Edward's second son; it might well be said that she was his favorite son.

To identify as Emily did with men, and with the privileges of a man's education, was often a means of emphasizing the life of the mind rather than that of housekeeping. Judging from the periodicals and newspapers to which the Dickinsons subscribed, homelife was itself an intellectual pursuit. Amherst residents received two mail deliveries a day. The Dickinsons took three Northern newspapers as well as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and—from its founding in 1857—*Atlantic Monthly* (Stewart 322). In the words of one historian, "the *Atlantic* was not a channel for American literature—it *was* American literature" (Pollitt 167). Staying abreast of national and state

news, as well as literary, scientific, and humanistic interests, was easy; it was also expected. But while the "men" of the family were reading the latest journals and papers, the routine housekeeping tasks were also ongoing. Much as she tried to avoid them, Emily still felt the conflict: should she be reading or should she be washing dishes? With what seems to be near derision, Emily jokes about her mother's obsession with those perpetual household duties. She writes about the reason she could not send along her mother's good wishes: "Mother would send her love—but she is in the 'eave spout,' sweeping up a leaf, that blew in, last November" (Habegger 63). As Dickinson's recent biographer Alfred Habegger describes this extended joke, pointing out that the letter was probably written in August, long after the leaf got lodged in the roof gutter's spout, he terms Emily's drawing "an unforgettable picture of an obsessed New England housekeeper driven from the comforts of home and much too busy to send her love, let alone to write" (Habegger 64).

Critics often commented on the fact that the "quiet and self-effacing" Emily Norcross, the woman Edward Dickinson had chosen to be his bride, was "excellent at managing her household" (Longsworth Amherst 22). She was responsibly educated and from a relatively affluent family in Munson. Yet as their correspondence from the several years of their engagement suggests, Emily was not a reader. She also seemed unwilling to write, or wrote with a practicality that expressed little romance: she was not a reader/writer as her daughter Emily Elizabeth would come to be, or was instinctively. Even as Barbara Mossberg contends that Dickinson's relationship with her mother was much less distant than some critics have suggested (Mossberg 38), there are few references in Dickinson's early letters that show any pride in either her mother or her role within the family. It does seem clear that the Norcross family, and perhaps eventually the Dickinson family in Amherst, professed the doctrines of the Popular Health Movement of the 1820s and the 1830s. Women understood that doing their own chores and cleaning—as well as gardening—could satisfy their physical need for exercise, and there are mentions—sometimes urgent—of the need for both Emily and Vinnie to get outdoors (Ehrenreich and English 69–70).

Longsworth also speculates that Emily Norcross may have inherited her "fearful, anxious temperament" from her own mother, Betsey Fay Norcross (Longsworth Amherst 22). Emily Norcross seemed to take immense pride in doing the housework and running the Dickinson house impeccably. As Habegger (62) points out, however, her life was marked by "her drivenness, her extreme thrift." To illustrate these characteristics, he tells the story of Emily's accepting boarders (boys who

were attending Amherst College and preferred staying with a reputable family), just a few months before her first child was due. The boys, a son and a nephew of a leading Springfield attorney, may have been seen as giving Edward Dickinson some sort of political advantage. But acknowledging the fact that throughout the Dickinsons' early years of marriage, the Norcross family worried about Emily—urging her to return home for rests, sending her girls from their family to help out—her decision to invite the boys to board seems foolhardy.

The truth about the Dickinson family was that poverty haunted their lives. Whereas critics have emphasized the fact that Emily Norcross insisted on being, literally, the maid of all work, seeing the family's financial situation whole excuses at least some of her obsessiveness. After Edward Dickinson had proposed to her and she had eventually accepted, he deferred their marriage for several years while he tried to pay off debts his father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, had accumulated. Samuel was one of the founders of Amherst Academy; he was continuously in financial difficulties, although he wanted to be seen as one of Amherst's leading citizens. As he poured what resources he had into Amherst Academy and Amherst College, his children knew they would need to help with this task—and with his other projects. Finally a bankrupt, Samuel "left Amherst in disgrace" (Murray 65) and moved to northern Ohio for a position; he died there, miles from his family, and left a legacy of possible chicanery as well as bankruptcy. Eventually in 1825 the family had to sell the Homestead, which Samuel had built in 1813, and which they then rented a part of during their early married years (Longsworth Amherst 15, Murray 65).

lt also seems clear, because the Dickinsons never had a full-time maid (according to the 1850 federal census 7 records), that all the children helped with the housework, the laundry, the tailoring, the cooking, and the yard. Aife Murray (66) tells the story that Emily was to be apprenticed to a baker when she was 14; such a plan seems at odds with the fact that all three of the Dickinson children had the best possible educations, Emily and Vinnie as well as Austin. As Murray notes, Emily was "already accomplished in knitting . . . needlework and mending." She went to school and had piano lessons, had many indoor plants, and "privately arranged German lessons" (Murray 66). It was not until March 7, 1850 that Edward Dickinson ran an ad for "a girl or woman to do the entire work of a small family" (Murray 73). Meanwhile, in the 1850 census, Emily Dickinson had listed her occupation as "keeping house," and then in a later letter complains when Vinnie is away, "my two hands but *two*—not four or five as they ought to be, and so *many*

wants—and me so *very* handy—and my time of so *little* account—and my writing so v*ery* needless" (LI 82).

Alfred Habegger also traces the anxiety stemming from financial losses from early in the family's history: putting off their wedding for several years, trying to maintain a house (or at least part of a house) with so little help, and infecting their children with their own financial worries. He believes that Emily especially felt "her parents' anxiety about financial insolvency" (Habegger 57). It is probable that this financial worry helped to shape Emily's choice of studies at both Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. She turned again and again to scientific curricula. In college, she took "ancient history and rhetoric" as well as "all science courses: algebra, Euclid [geometry], physiology, chemistry and astronomy" (Gordon 42). The authority on the way Emily Dickinson both studied science and drew from it for her poetry is Robin Peel, whose 2010 book thoroughly discusses both the courses (and their texts and emphases) and relevant Dickinson poems. Peel's aim is to present Emily as a "scientific investigator," drawing on what she sees as the exciting new, scientific culture (Peel 13–14). He asks that readers see Emily Dickinson "as a concealed natural philosopher/scientist" working in ways that mimic scientists contemporary with her (14). (One thinks of Emily's trip home from college in 1848 for the dedication of the telescope in the Amherst Observatory, installed as part of the Octagon Building, an excitement the whole town shared. The various segments of The Smithsonian Institute and Museum in Washington, DC, were not in place until a decade later, 1859, Peel 21).

The connection between Emily's consistent interest in science and her family's often precarious finances may be that she saw some opportunities for employment in the newly categorized field: Peel notes that some of her structures in her early poems were geared to making "scientific claims" and emphasizing scientific details; in fact, it could be that her creation of the fascicles (the small tied-together booklets of her poems) was a way of preserving field notes (Peel 17). To undergird this interest was the obvious fact that many of the journals carried essays about matters that were more scientific than philosophical: family discussion would have privileged "science" almost unconsciously.

Peel points out that the fascination with the new that marked the 1830s and 1840s changed during the later years of Emily's education. Rather than just describing and observing, people interested in science were now applying the principles, especially in medical fields. Creating hypotheses became the standard for proving material learned, rather than memorizing the long blocks of information that had previously

marked science class methodology (Peel 78, 17). He notes how seriously Emily took her herbarium, and how often in her poetry she closely observed "flowers, insects, and birds . . . as if she were making a scientific record" (91, 172). Throughout her poems, Dickinson uses the metaphor of sight, as in "I see New Englandly" (Peel 81). There are also more volcanoes, winds, and storms in her poems than might be expected.

All the courses of study at Amherst Academy were more scientific than most curricula because the third president of the school was Edward Hitchcock, a well-known geologist with strong interests in paleontology. While Emily often followed the classes that Austin had chosen, Vinnie seemed to prefer a more humanities-based course of study. Again, Emily was no doubt aligning herself with Austin as a way of interesting her father in her intellectual prowess.

With the sometimes strange juxtapositions that occur in any culture, the impetus to study science came at a time when Massachusetts was overtaken with protestant revivalism. The coercion to accept Christ, to become a Christian and an active church member, was almost frenetic at mid-century. Cynthia Griffin Wolff acknowledges that despite Emily Dickinson's comparatively wide knowledge of science and philosophy, all her educable life she struggled with the question of conversion (Wolff 87): "Even by the middle of the nineteenth century, Amherst—both college and town—still looked upon conversion as one of the crucial events that marked the division between carefree youth and responsible adulthood . . . . [conversion] was a recognized public rite of passage" (Wolff 93).

Emily Norcross had converted in 1831, but no other family members had done so. It was, however, the revival meetings in the winter and spring of 1850 that succeeded in proselytizing much of Amherst. On August 11, 1850, Emily's father converted; in November, Vinnie professed her faith (Wolff 104). Emily maintained the position that had grown during her months attending Mount Holyoke: she was a non-believer.

The Mount Holyoke experience was unexpectedly coercive. Mary Lyon, the head of the college and a protégé of Edward Hitchcock, created an atmosphere at the school that was "unremitting and inescapable." Women were recognized at assemblies on their standing as converts or non-converts; Emily Dickinson was grouped in the "No hope" category and saw many of her peers in that classification weeping because they were not saved (Wolff 100–1). (Habegger speaks about the non-believers having to attend what he calls the "painful collective inquiry sessions," 199). In one instance, at the deathbed of a beautiful

classmate [Emma Washburn], the unconverted students were asked to come so that Emma might urge their conversions. Her death in itself (occurring from "galloping" consumption) was a scarifying event, but to have her implore her friends to follow her to God was unforgettable (Mamunes 45–6). Emily Dickinson felt even more of an outsider during this revival turmoil, especially when several of her best friends converted later in 1850.

It is also true that much of Emily Dickinson's education came from the people she knew and loved—either in person or through her many letters. It is impossible, then, to replicate what she had learned at the close of her formal education by simply studying the textbooks from her classes, at either Amherst Academy or Mount Holyoke. For more than two years, Ben Newton, one of her father's law clerks/students, had been Emily's tutor. She called him that a decade later—after his death—as she wrote about him and his tutelage to friends, and it seems clear that from the time she left Mount Holyoke at her father's insistence, worried as he often was about her timorous health, until Newton moved from Amherst back to Worcester, the two spent great amounts of time together. Newton was an open-minded man, not yet committed to Christ, interested in new writers like the Brontës and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and encouraging about Emily's poetry. He told her she would one day *be* a poet. From a poor farm family, Newton had not attended college but he was apt, smart, and dedicated to becoming a lawyer. He was also ill with consumption, the primary malady of the mid-nineteenth century in Amherst and its surroundings. At 26, Newton had already spent years earning the money for his law study—probably working as a teacher—but he remained terrifically poor: biographers have long wondered how he paid for his two years in Amherst, and the following year in Worcester, after which he finally earned his degree (Mamunes 14–15). Emily was only 17 but she was well-educated, intent on becoming what she could be even though resistant to conversion, appreciative of the beauties of nature—as was Newton—and deeply worried about her own illnesses (which seem at this time to be connected with consumption although somewhat later, Lyndall Gordon suggests, she may have developed fainting and seizure disorders as well). (Gordon 78–135).

Rife with novels, stories and poems about the sad lives of consumptives, mid-nineteenth century American culture provided examples aplenty of both the gruesome hemorrhage scenes—often death scenes—and the impossibility of any couple's marrying when one or the other was consumptive. Death waited around corners; the still-living partner

and whatever children had been born were marked for lives of only sorrow. Not only was Emily reading *Jane Eyre*; another of the popular novels that Emily admired was this story of consumption, Ik Marvel's *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850). The huge following that Marvel's (Donald Grant Mitchell's) writing enjoyed made his books sound more sentimental than they were. They worked with commonplace themes and situations, but they were pertinent to Emily's interests in her nineteenth year. It was difficult to avoid the consumptive-love theme during this period: Philip Goodwin's *Lily White*; T. S. Arthur's *Seed-time and Harvest*; Samuel Elliot's *Dreams and Realities*; Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the death of Eva and the illness of her mother; Josephine Franklin's *Rachel*—a novel of "unutterable anguish" as well as the incessant loss of blood in the mother's last hemorrhage: each work posits the dismal life after the great loss of the consumptive, as well as the possibility that the tendency for the disease will be inherited by the children of any such union (Mamunes 100–47). There are also the poems written by Emerson, Irving, and Lowell on the deaths of their wives from consumption.

It was the 1847 collection of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poems that Ben Newton gave Emily after he left Amherst, a collection that included Emerson's poem upon the death of his young, beloved wife Ellen. When Emily wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey, she commented about the gift, which she called "a beautiful copy" and about the letter, saying that she would write to Newton "in about three weeks" (Habegger 219). Saving her reply to coincide with Valentine's Day and its extensive celebration, Emily wrote one of her most impressive early poems. "Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine" calls on all the spirits of the arts and of lovers, announcing in its first lines "Oh the Earth was *made* for lovers, for damsel, and hopeless swain,/ for sighing, and gentle whispering, and *unity* made of *twain*,/ all things do go a courting, in earth, or sea, or air,/ God hath made nothing single but *thee* in his world so fair!" (Franklin 49). Unlike Emily Dickinson's poems in the decades to come, this apostrophe to the conventional spirits—expressing conventional love sentiments—shows the poet's apt handling of poetic traditions. Her irregular rhyme scheme, like her irregular capitalization of the first word in each line, shows her defiance of the rote even here: the long lines and the inherent ambition of this Valentine's Day poem, compared with the poem she wrote in 1852, shows how strong her early talent was. But there are very few poems extant from this early period in Emily's writing. (The 1852 Valentine's Day poem is written in quatrains; it expresses an even more conventional sentiment.)

Not only did Emily realize what a gap the absence of Ben Newton would create, and attempt to fill that gap through serious attention to what was to become her art; her father, Edward Dickinson, bought for her Carlo, the half-St. Bernard, half-Newfoundland who was to be her companion for the next 15 years. Josephine Pollitt spoke decisively early on in her 1930 biography about the bond between father and daughter: Emily "was from the first his companion spirit in that household. He liked to sit in the dim parlor and listen to her playing the piano; he preferred her bread and prune whips . . . he guarded her health jealously. It was he who took her driving with him that she might be out in the fresh air . . . ; he who mixed the doses of medicine" (Pollitt 239).

Another use in Emily's mind for her comparatively deep training in science was to ferret out information about the various illnesses that marred her young life, illnesses that also carried off good friends and acquaintances. When Emily was only 13, her good friend Sophia Holland died of consumption. As she wrote to Abiah Root, "I gave way to a fixed melancholy" (in Wolff 77). In the spring of 1848 she lost her friend Jacob Holt; previously she was aware of the deaths from consumption of Susan Gilbert's mother Harriet (in 1837) and Sophia Holland's mother, Fanny (in 1844). Her own family saw the death of their minister's wife Elizabeth Parsons that same year and of, most closely, in 1860, Emily Lavinia Norcross, their aunt, whose children Lou and Fanny were like sisters to the Dickinson children (Habegger 640). In 1850, Susan Gilbert's older sister Mary died soon after giving birth Emily refers to her as "dear Mary, sainted Mary" (Hart and Smith 7); as did Leonard Humphrey, a preceptor at Amherst Academy. In 1851, four of Emily's earlier classmates died and in 1852, her cousin and former roommate at Mount Holyoke—Emily Norcross—was dead of consumption (Longsworth Amherst 30). Given the web of mourning that was already surrounding Emily Dickinson, her phrase in an 1852 letter to Susan Gilbert might seem less of an exaggeration: "when you come, *if we all live till then*, it will be precious, Susie" (Hart and Smith 26; my italics).

Science however could never replace her love for literature. With her girlfriends, which more and more often included Susan and Mattie Gilbert, and Vinnie (and sometimes even Austin), Emily read works from both England and the United States. Among her regular correspondents by this time were Abby Wood, Abiah Root, Harriet Merrill, Sarah Tracy (the group, including Emily, known as "the five"), according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff (75). To those young women one might add Emily Fowler, who was Noah Webster's granddaughter, and Jane Humphrey. These

readers were perusing not only Ik Marvel and Charles Dickens (*Bleak House* at the time) but *Only* and *A House Upon a* Rock by Matilda Anne Mackarness, *Alton Lock* by Charles Kingsley, *Head of a Family* and *Olive* by Dinah Maria Craik, and Mary Elizabeth Stirling's memorial *The Light in the Valley* (Hart and Smith 20). Most significant in 1850, setting her work apart from the merely "popular," was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

It should be said that 1850 was a crucial year for United States culture. Preceded by Harriet Tubman's escape from slavery on the Underground Railroad in December of 1849, and privy to the publication of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in 1850, in September of 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, forcing abolitionists in northern states like Massachusetts to decide what their convictions were about freeing the African American slaves. More frequently in the media than the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention had been, the Fugitive Slave Law took more than equal billing with the scientific and literary events that peppered print "news." Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* were frequently commented upon since she was herself something of a hero: ill from childhood, protected by her father from any taste of real life until he lost his fortune and moved the family from their palatial home into a Wimpole Street apartment, Elizabeth Barrett was rescued from her secluded life by the passionate love of Robert Browning, another British poet, though one not so acclaimed as she. After the couple married and moved to Italy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—against medical advice—bore a son. It might be said that the Brownings were one of the first glamorous couples of the time, celebrated for their great love more frequently than for their poems.

For readers who knew poetry and poetic conventions, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was an unconventional book. Sonnet cycles were usually written by male lovers, praising the beauties of women, who were the intended recipients of the poems. In this case, the poet's voice is female and the great love expressed goes clearly to a male lover. Probing the roles that her society assumed were always gendered, Emily Dickinson felt a kind of ownership with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's accomplishment, and when the latter's long, almost epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, was published in 1856, Emily read and re-read it until she knew whole sections from memory. Years after Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death from consumption in 1861, Emily still wore her hair "looped over her ears and knotted in back," reminiscent of the way Barrett Browning had styled her hair (Benfey Amherst 204). She also had a framed picture of this admired author on her bedroom wall, and also "sent pictures of Barrett Browning to several of her friends" (Benfey Amherst 205).