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PÁRAIC FINNERTY

“You’ll be the only Dickinson they talk about in two hundred years”:

Queer Celebrity, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, A Quiet Passion, Wild Nights

with Emily, and *Apple TV+*’s *Dickinson*

In episode one of *Apple TV+*’s *Dickinson* (2019-2021), when the eponymous poet tells Death of her father’s concern that she will ruin “the good name of Dickinson,” Death promises, “You’ll be the only Dickinson they talk about in two hundred years.” After the poet then asks Death how she will achieve immortality if she does not publish, he tells her that “Publicity’s not the same thing as immortality” and that her type of immortality will not come from being “good and well behaved” and “following the rules” but from “breaking them.” Here and elsewhere, the television series draws on preoccupations in Dickinson’s writings with the idea of an afterlife, personal or literary, elaborating her fantasies and fears about public exposure and acclaim, and a posthumous reputation shaped by her violations of the era’s norms. The series connects its protagonist’s growing sense of herself as someone whose gender and sexual identity does not conform to conventional ideas with her development into a confident, non-publishing poet. Across *Dickinson*’s three seasons, the cultural and literary icon it celebrates is an anti-celebrity celebrity who refused to occupy the place her era’s mass-media culture designated for authors and who broke its rules determining fame.¹

The recently concluded television series and two slightly earlier films about the poet’s life, Terence Davies’s *A Quiet Passion* (2016) and Madeleine Olnek’s *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018), ensure that the poet, it would seem, has never been more fully embedded in popular

culture or more “talked about” beyond the confines of academia and the cultural heritage industry. As we approach the bicentenary of her birth, in 2030, Dickinson is a canonical poet *and* a celebrity—a publicity-mediated figure whose name is entangled in the type of global promotion that accompanies television and movie productions and their stars. Of course, Dickinson’s celebrity began in the 1890s following the publication of her writings and was shaped, in part, by her engagements with her era’s modes of literary celebrity.² Dickinson scholars have begun to take account of her relationship with nineteenth-century celebrity culture and to trace her posthumous celebrity.³ Sandra Runzo’s recent exploration of Dickinson and popular culture, for example, highlights the benefits of bringing these two topics together. Her work examines both the poet’s cognizance of how nineteenth-century conventions routinely turned musicians, performers, and entertainers into celebrities and how Dickinson, in her lifetime and especially after her death, became “a spectacle, a person turned into a ‘curiosity,’ a mystery spurring creative public speculation” (147).

This essay connects Dickinson’s negotiations with nineteenth-century celebrity culture and her contemporary celebrity status, especially her twenty-first-century position as a queer icon. Sharon Marcus’s scholarship provides a particularly useful framework for discussing recurring characteristics of celebrity in Dickinson’s life and afterlife. For Marcus, celebrity culture is “a drama involving three equally powerful groups: media producers, members of the public, and celebrities themselves” (3). Although Dickinson did not occupy the role of celebrity in this triumvirate in her lifetime, she influenced the drama of her own celebrity through her engagements with contemporaries such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who were stakeholders in the dynamic set of social relationships and processes that conferred and revoked renown in her era. As Marcus explains, celebrities are “simultaneously representative and unique,” imitable and distinctive (19); they are normative and defiant figures who paradoxically “flaunt indifference to the consequences of defying society . . . while claiming

boundless social credit” (23). Celebrities typically are inspirational, sensational, and dominating figures, who parade and celebrate social norms while also opening space for alternatives to those norms. Dickinson’s queering of celebrity is about her subverting or repurposing these norms to create new possibilities, in particular her conceptualizing of non-celebrity.

The essay begins by delineating Dickinson’s complex participation in the mechanisms of nineteenth-century fame by using this context to examine anew her much-discussed correspondence with Higginson. Having established an intimate relationship with this famous man, Dickinson reverses the traditional celebrity-fan hierarchy: she fascinates *him* by appropriating nineteenth-century associations of celebrity in order to fashion a unique persona that displayed social and artistic defiance. Her exchanges with Higginson exemplify her construction of her notability among admirers through defying expectations determining public success and failure and unsettling conventions separating public and private figures. The essay then traces how her posthumous fame has transformed her private habits of noncompliance into public, inspirational acts of defiance. It discusses how the recent cinematic and televised representations of Dickinson’s life develop the insights of biographical and critical studies to emphasize her gender and sexual non-conformity. These works foreground a defiant Dickinson’s increasingly prominent role as an LGBTQ+ icon and an endorser of non-heteronormative identities and experiences. Viewed in the context of Dickinson’s engagement with nineteenth-century celebrity culture, however, these screen representations can be said to also grapple with her *queer* celebrity: her position as an anomalous figure whose twenty-first-century popularity, ironically, stems from her shunning of her era’s mass-media attention, her choice of a private life over the public one that has been subsequently foisted upon her, and her disordering, or queering, of norms and assumptions relating to fame.⁴

An Amherst Notable: Higginson's Dickinson

As Sharon Marcus details, celebrities are repeatedly artistic and social rule breakers whose “deliberate unconventionality” challenges the cultures that acclaim them (42). Moreover, as Marcus explains celebrities’ idiosyncrasies, public transgressions, and their indifference to the pull of conformity can be especially liberating for socially marginalized groups. Celebrities who publicly endorse or embrace queerness, for example, help increase the social acceptance of a range of identities that were previously “demonized and concealed” (Marcus 49). Provoking identification and imitation, defiant celebrities can become a “potential resource for those wishing to assert their freedom from social norms and constraints” (Marcus 166). The recent films and television show indicate that Dickinson has come to be one such celebrity. However, Dickinson’s defiance is not a facet of normative celebrity. The roots of her defiance begin in her understanding of and participation in nineteenth-century celebrity culture and then in her queering of its workings to savvily lay the foundations for her own celebrity.

In her life, Dickinson resisted celebrity culture’s mass-media mechanisms that placed individuals, under conditions of heightened publicity, before a vast, anonymous audience and that normalized public invasiveness and the need for public figures to balance self-revelation and self-concealment (O’Neill 3-5). In her writings, however, she repurposed these celebrity processes, estranging key characteristics of public personalities to represent herself and her inviolable privacy. Her disruptive, evasive language, what might be termed her queer style, delegitimized the identities and categories through which celebrity culture operated and through which celebrities became known. She created a self-protecting language that obfuscated (and still obfuscates) attempts of to gain access to her privacy. Dickinson’s (proto-)queer defiance, then, continues to shape her celebrity and is something that her admirers, in the nineteenth century and thereafter, experience as their frustration and fascination with her strategic resistances to their desire to know and represent her.

Although she did not seek popular fame in her lifetime, she actively participated in celebrity culture's personalization of public figures and was drawn to its circulation of celebrities' biographical information and visual representations which provided admirers with access to their private lives. Celebrity culture's mechanisms created the illusion of intimacy with authors and as a result fans like Dickinson related to celebrities in affective terms and with assumed familiarity (see Marcus, O'Neill). As well as acquiring the literary works of authors she admired, Dickinson sought out their biographies and likenesses (JL271, JL692, JL813A), mourned their deaths (Fr600, M 274), sympathized with their personal losses (JL244), defended them against critics (JL979), identified with them as a fellow writer (JL298). She also imagined journeying to places associated with celebrity writers (Fr146, M 86; Fr637, M 322) and asked friends who were visiting Europe to have celebrity encounters on her behalf or hear what was being said there about her idols (JL266). Most startling, but not surprising given his fame at the time and the availability of his visual representations, Dickinson dreamt that her sister-in-law Sue met the Poet Laureate Tennyson (JL320). Dickinson's involvement in typical nineteenth-century fan behavior does not, however, seem to have extended to her writing to authors requesting autographs, locks of hair, personal items, or handwritten verses, with the belief that such material objects brought them closer to celebrities (Marcus 105-8). But Dickinson did go further than most admirers at the time by achieving the ultimate goal of establishing an actual friendship with a famous author: Higginson. And her queering of celebrity culture norms is best illustrated by her engagement with him.⁵

Placed in the terms of nineteenth-century fame discourse outlined by the scholar Nicholas Dames, Higginson was a celebrity, a figure "meant to be observed, brushed up against, talked about, and above all *recognized*" (32-33). *The Springfield Republican*, which Dickinson read daily, presented Higginson as a distinguished, newsworthy man whose fame crossed several different fields and who occupied a wide circle of influence in mass culture as

a writer, religious thinker, women's rights activist, and abolitionist (Leyda II 59-60, 66, 70, 135, 210-12, 239, 309-10). Even before Dickinson wrote to him, she must have read about him (Leyda I 332, Leyda II 25, 32).⁶ As was typical at the time, nineteenth-century print media ensured that readers knew not only what celebrities such as Higginson did but also provided personal information about their homes and their physical appearance.⁷ The *Republican* expects readers to be interested in what Higginson looked like and what that might reveal about his inner character.⁸

Dickinson began a correspondence with this famous man, engaging in the typical nineteenth-century practice of admirers writing to celebrities for advice or counsel (Marcus 107-8). In her first letter to Higginson, she asked him to tell her if her poems were "alive," if they "breathed," but also to protect her "Honor" which she "pawn[ed]" in writing to him (JL260). Dickinson was encouraged to do so because Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor" essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* uses a very personal form of address, like that of other journalistic pieces at this time that encouraged familiarity and contact between author and reader (O'Neill 53-55); it was his public reply to the many private letters he received from would-be contributors to this periodical. Dickinson already knew this famous man would protect her honor because his essay revealed his wariness about celebrity. He cautioned authors about the pitfalls of writing for the marketplace and for renown and instead encouraged writers to concentrate on perfecting their craft through careful attention to diction, style, and tradition. Setting out a context in which the reading public awards "transitory reputations" and was also "the organ of eternal justice and infallibly awards posthumous fame," Higginson warned that early success did not guarantee, and might be detrimental to, literary immortality (Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor" 404). Writers who write to appeal to current public taste may enjoy immediate notice, but they should not become complacent because they may be overlooked when literary tastes change. Similarly, neglected geniuses are warned about being

proud of their obscurity because although some will come to public attention many never will. Those who seek literary immortality should patiently develop their artistic powers with the aim of creating works, like Shakespeare's, that are "read" rather than "only printed" ("Letter to a Young Contributor" 410). While Higginson expressed the "fascinating privilege" of "bringing forward a new genius" to the world, he acknowledges that those who have "a marked gift for literary expression" are rare ("Letter to a Young Contributor" 401, 410). His central message for writers is to engage in poetic labor as an end in itself: he writes, "fame or forgetfulness, can bring no real injury to one who has formed the fixed purpose to live nobly day by day" (Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor" 410). Rather than seeking advice about publishing, Dickinson probably wrote to him to gain *private* recognition from a public man. She may have chosen him because his valuation of artistry over fame resonated with her own views. His essay and their almost twenty-five-year relationship supported Dickinson's emergent and soon dominant conception of herself as a non-publishing poet (see Miller 176-195).⁹

Dickinson makes it very clear in their correspondence that she was the admirer and Higginson was the celebrity. She addressed Higginson in deferential terms: she idolized him, presenting him as a "perfectly powerful," otherworldly figure, and reverentially responded to him. She is his "Scholar" (JL268) and "Pupil" (JL546), who delights in and seeks to read everything he has written (JL352, JL368, JL488). He is her "Preceptor" (JL265, JL271) and "Master" (JL575), and a famous man whom "the Papers had spoken of . . . with affectionate deference" (JL519). Dickinson often underlined that her knowledge of his public and private life came from reading about it in newspapers and periodicals (JL290, JL381, JL546, JL630). She noted his works' importance for her, quoted from them, and even compared them to Shakespeare's: "your Pages and Shakespeare's, like Ophir - remain -" (JL593). She even made him and his regard the sole arbiter of any public position, remarking, for example, "I thought

your approbation Fame - and it's withdrawal infamy" (JL486); his acknowledgement of her talent "saved" her life (JL330).

The Dickinson-Higginson relationship, however, also reverses the roles, expectations, and contexts of nineteenth-century interactions between public figures and their admirers. In her early letters, Dickinson does not ask Higginson any questions about himself; what she needs to know about him has already appeared in print (Hoppe 362). Instead, in her second letter to him, she replied as if she were the celebrity and he the fan to his questions about her age, how much she has written, her literary influences, companions, family, and religious views. In this letter, and in the majority she sent to him, Dickinson engages in celebrity-like tactics that effortlessly combine personal revelation with unremitting concealment to intrigue him (Marcus 96). Her early letters to Higginson are designed "to captivate him rather than attract his interpretations or readily answer his questions" through "her deliberate and uncomfortable juxtaposition of intimacy and distance" (Hoppe 352, Freedman 624). Her enigmatic writing style meant that biographical revelations were always already forms of personal concealment (see MacKenzie). Some of the poems she sent him during the first year of their correspondence complicate the relationship between public knowledge and hidden experience. For example, in "I cannot dance upon my Toes - " (Fr381, M 203), Dickinson contrasts the joyful experience of an unrecognized, secret talent with the fantasy of public renown. In "Success is counted sweetest" (Fr112, M 69), she unsettles the differences between notions of success and failure by presenting the idea of a recognition that is purely private and comes too late and is in effect posthumous.

Years later, Higginson chose another of the poems he received "The nearest Dream recedes - unrealized - " (Fr304, M 159) to summarize the nature of their relationship: "The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy more than she evaded me; and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 445). Given the context he

is referring to, Higginson's comment positions the poem within the dynamics of celebrity culture. He is using this playful poem about evasion to attest to his own sense that the roles of celebrity and fan indeed had shifted and conformed now to the dynamic predicted by the poem years earlier. The poem implies that the seeming familiarity and proximity of the celebrity encourages the fan's pursuit but denies the possibility of actual contact. The promise of access to the celebrated person's private life culminates not in presence and possession but absence and loss. Much later in their correspondence, in 1870, Dickinson sent the following lines to Higginson to characterize the dynamics of their interactions: "The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise - / Not anything is stale so long / As Yesterday's surprise -" (Fr1180, M 550). The poem's idea that fascination is fueled by enigma was also central to the workings of nineteenth-century fame in which audiences were drawn to celebrated authors who magnified their public presence while hinting at another self that "remains unacknowledged, hidden in the shadows of [their] own celebrity" (O'Neill 182). Similarly, Dickinson showed Higginson the attraction and power of textual and personal obscurity.

At a time when key characteristics of celebrity were personal uniqueness and even freakish individualism (O'Neill 43-45), Dickinson carefully communicated her unusualness to Higginson. She described herself as the "only Kangaroo among the Beauty" (JL268), a figure whom "All men say 'What' to" (JL271) and who shunned men and women (JL271). Dickinson highlighted her singularity by denying his desire for more information. Higginson recalls that when he sought a "picture, that [he] might form some impression of [his] enigmatical correspondent" ("Letters of Emily Dickinson" 447), she told him: "I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur - and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves" (JL268). Her substitute of a verbal for an actual portrait further emphasizes her exceptionality. She had no image of herself at a time when developments in engraving and photography made likenesses of people, especially those in the

public eye, readily available (Marcus 127). Unsurprisingly, an intrigued Higginson sought out information about his “singular poetic correspondent” from others (JL342b): her uncle, Helen Hunt Jackson, and President Stearns of Amherst College (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 445; Leyda II 111, 152-3).

But Higginson became quickly aware of how Dickinson displayed one of the recurring traits of famous figures in her era: personal and artistic defiance. As Marcus explains, defiant celebrities “do more than simply display unconventionality. They model an emotional attitude of indifference to nonconformity’s potential consequences” (24). While Dickinson’s defiance remains within the privacy of her relationship with Higginson, she appropriates the attributes of her era’s overly independent, cultural outsiders, figures such as Lord Byron, George Sand, Sarah Bernhardt, and Oscar Wilde, who overtly repudiated normalcy, popularized eccentricity, and “made deliberate unconventionality the key to [their] celebrity persona[e]” (Marcus 42). Similarly, Bonnie Carr O’Neill demonstrates how the celebrity of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Fanny Fern rested, sometimes uncomfortably, on their compliance with and subversion of social norms (70-73, 93-4, 121-2, 170-1).

Having been confronted with Dickinson’s nonconformity, a fascinated Higginson writes in a May 11, 1869 letter:

It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live s[o alo]ne, with thoughts of such a [quali]ty coming up in you & even the companionship of your dog withdrawn. Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you - so perhaps the place does not make much difference (JL330a).

More than anything else Higginson wanted to meet this highly individualistic figure who told him: “there is always one thing to be grateful for - that one is one’s self & not somebody else” (JL405). However, Higginson’s “unseen correspondent Emily Dickinson” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 452) repeatedly rejects his requests to visit Boston asking him instead to

visit her in Amherst (JL319). Had Dickinson gone to Boston, Higginson would have lionized her among his coterie as *his* “eccentric poetess . . . who *never* goes outside her father’s grounds & sees only me & a few others” (Leyda II 213). He would have presented his literary circle with a figure whom he had talked about and whose poems he had read for them (Leyda II 239). Her refusals to leave her Amherst home underscore her indifference to the literary and cultural world of Boston that arbitrated public success and failure and of which Higginson was an emissary. In a similar manner, she ignored his advice, so he “abandoned all attempts to guide in the slightest degree this extraordinary nature” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 450). Instead, assured in her own position as a writer, she formidably and authoritatively signed off six of her letters to him “Dickinson” (JL316, 319, 330, 352, 368, 371).

Higginson’s desire to see this defiant poet reflects a partial reversal in their relationship, as he begins to behave with a fan’s desire to seek physical contact and proximity as a means of gaining intimacy with and having access to a public figure’s private, authentic identity (Marcus 50-59, O’Neill 5-14). For him, only a face-to-face meeting would render her material rather than spectral:

Sometimes I take out your letters & verses, dear friend, and when I feel their strange power, it is not strange that I find it hard to write & that long months pass. I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that perhaps if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but till then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light. (JL330a)

His letter echoes her depiction of him as a ghostly celebrity, whom she “should be glad to see . . . but think[s] it an apparitional pleasure - not to be fulfilled” (JL316). This spectral imagery evokes nineteenth-century representations of celebrities as phantom-like figures who are both present and absent in an admirer’s life. Female celebrities were often represented using ghostly imagery to capture the “interplay of presence and absence in women’s literary careers” and “the mysteriousness and spectrality of women’s participation in the public realm” through a careful combination of self-display and self-concealment (Easley 50).

When Higginson finally met Dickinson in Amherst on 16 August 1870, it was as if he was meeting a famous figure. Part of Dickinson’s defiant personality is to never be exactly what Higginson expects. Evoking and unsettling emerging stereotypes of female celebrities at this time, Dickinson carefully managed her appearance and performance. Higginson’s first impression is of Dickinson as a child-like, ethereal figure:

A step like a pattering child’s in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove’s; not plainer - with no good feature—in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said “These are my introduction” in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice (JL342a).

Dickinson's self-presentation shows her using strategies shared with the era's celebrities who had the "highly theatrical goal of drawing attention to [themselves]" (Marcus 151). The entrance recalls her own description of the Swedish singer Jenny Lind whom the Dickinsons saw perform in 1851 at Northampton: "how Jennie came out like a child and sang and sang again, how boquets fell in showers, and the roof was rent with applause" (JL46). Dickinson shows her awareness of the power of spectacle in media coverage of celebrities such as Lind and the way stars' appearances, costumes, and props highlighted their distinctiveness as well as their imitability (see Marcus 149-156).

Rather than being the archetypal otherworldly poetess, Dickinson, in her subsequent conversation with Higginson, inhabits but privatizes the stereotype of the dominating celebrity with him taking the role of her dominated fan (Marcus 48-50, 67). During their intimate meeting, Dickinson acts like the kind of public figure who carefully combines self-promotion with self-concealment. Higginson compared her "Manner" of speaking to that of the public polemicists Amos Bronson Alcott and Angela Tilton Heywood, adding that she was "thoroughly ingenuous & simple which they are not" (JL342a). Dickinson talked continuously, deferentially, and aphoristically, becoming in-person an embodiment of her mysterious and intriguing epistolary style. In his 1891 published account of their meeting in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Higginson described how the "overstrained" nature of their interaction meant he could not bring it to the level of "simple truth and every-day comradeship"; she "was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 453). For him, Dickinson is "an enigma" who "evaded" his scrutiny "with a naïve skill such as the most experienced and worldly coquette might envy" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 445). She also drained his "nerve power": "Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her" (JL342b).

Borrowing and revising key characteristics of nineteenth-century celebrities, Dickinson defiantly queers them by fashioning herself as wholly private, uninterested in publication, and anxious about publicity. The portion of Higginson's essay that provides readers with his account of meeting Dickinson in her own home, however, is comparable to other celebrity interviews emerging on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1880s and 1890s. In this regard, Higginson's "dramatization of the actual event of the interview works as a means of exhibiting the celebrity" in the intimacy of their surroundings and giving readers a sense of being present "upon this intimate occasion" and allowing them "to come closer to embodying the immediate presence of its subject" (Salmon 164). That Higginson's 1891 account of their 1870 meeting is so like the popular *Celebrity-at-Home* genre underscores Dickinson's successful appropriation of celebrity discourse to her advantage. Higginson begins by emphasizing the privacy of Dickinson's existence, for example, by noting how her home, "one of those large, square, brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns," was carefully protected from view by being "surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 452). In so doing, he stresses his privileged position as an interviewer who rarely saw visitors ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 444). As was typical of similar interviews at the time, Higginson provides readers with information about the celebrity's childhood, family, homelife, and daily occupation. Despite revealing key information about the poet, Higginson, like other interviewers, used a "rhetoric of obstruction" and showed a "reluctance to divulge" secrets and solve the interviewee's mystery (Salmon 168). As he admits, "I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before;--on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 453). Here, and throughout his writings about Dickinson, Higginson repeats her disordering of distinctions between self-effacement and self-exposure and between shunning and courting publicity.

The Dickinson-Higginson relationship additionally shows that by the 1870s Dickinson was a known poet and personality in Amherst and beyond: she had achieved notability, “which always resides within a circumscribed sphere[,] . . . remain[s] limited to a particular circle, and . . . [is] a deeply relativistic sense of fame” (Dames 28-9). Aware of the increasing difficulty in her era of achieving immediate or posthumous fame without navigating the realities of celebrity culture, Dickinson curated her notability through establishing social connections and relationships with figures such as Higginson (see Hoppe). To this chosen circle, she also advertised herself as unique and defiant, as a non-publishing, publicity-shunning poet who preferred their *private* admiration to public fame. When, as Higginson recalls, “her verses found too much favor for her comfort, and she was urged to publish. In such cases I was sometimes put forward as a defense” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 451; see L380, L676). On one occasion, Dickinson quoted from his “Letter to a Young Contributor” to validate her refusals: “Often, when troubled by entreaty, that paragraph of your’s has saved me - ‘Such being the Majesty of the Art you presume to practice, you can at least take time before dishonoring it’” (JL488).

The member of Dickinson’s circle who was most insistent that Dickinson should publish was the poet and novelist Helen Hunt Jackson, with whom Higginson had discussed and shared Dickinson’s poems. Jackson told Dickinson that she was “a great poet,” reprimanded her for “not sing[ing] aloud” (JL444a), and pressured her into agreeing to publish “Success is counted sweetest” (Fr112, M 69) anonymously in *A Masque of Poets* (1878). To help her counteract Jackson’s intentions, Dickinson turned to Higginson, her “safest friend,” for a “note” for Jackson to say that he was against the idea of publication (JL476; see also JL477). In 1882, Jackson involved the editor of Roberts Brothers, Thomas Niles: he told Dickinson that Jackson “wished you could be induced to publish a volume of poems. I should not want to say how highly she praised them, but to such an extent that I wish also that you

could” (JL749b). A year later he asked for “a M.S. collection of your poems, that is, if you want to give them to the world through the medium of a publisher” (JL813b). Dickinson resisted these and other attempts to enter the mass-media marketplace. Reiterating her determination to be unrestrained by the workings of publicity, her 1882 poem “How happy is the little Stone” (Fr1570, M 635), which she sent to Higginson, Niles, and perhaps Jackson, celebrates the defiant freedom of the stone that “rambles in the Road alone / And does’nt care about Careers” and is “independent as the sun.” In contrast to Dickinson’s determination to remain hidden to the public, Jackson, in 1884, believed it was “a cruel wrong” to Dickinson’s “generation” that she would not “give . . . [her poems] light” (JL937a).

Dickinson’s notability meant that her need to control access to her private life and physical presence only increased fascination in and scrutiny about “the *character* of Amherst . . . the *Myth* . . . [who] has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years She dresses wholly in white . . . She writes finely, but no one *ever* sees her.” (Leyda II 375). Although Dickinson’s lifetime of refusals to meet others’ expectations were interpreted as personal eccentricity or psychological abnormality and even pathologized, her fame from the beginning was linked to her unconventionality and willingness to defy expectations. Higginson’s preface to the first volume of Dickinson’s poems (1890), which he co-edited with Mabel Loomis Todd, markets Dickinson as a rarity. He recalls, for example, that when he met her “face to face,” he brought “away the impression of something as unique and remote as Undine or Mignon or Thekla” (Preface v). Dickinson’s now published poems provide exclusive access to a wondrous, recalcitrant figure, who “habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends” and who could not be “persuaded to print [more than a few poems] during her lifetime” (Preface iv). Making her unique selling point her resistance to the commercial marketplace and celebrity culture, Higginson and Todd’s edition exhibits Dickinson’s “daring” poems as extracts of pure privacy “produced absolutely without the

thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind" (Preface iii). Her poem's irregular features, for Higginson, are owing to their unmediated, unspoiled, quality, and the fact she was "indifferent to all conventional rules, [and] had yet a rigorous literary standard of her own" (Preface iv).

In Higginson's "Emily Dickinson's Letters," he recognizes that it is her unconventionality that has caused "the sudden rise of Emily Dickinson into a posthumous fame" and to become a curiosity of American literary history. For him, her unparalleled success was accentuated by "the utterly reclusive character of her life[,] . . . her aversion to even a literary publicity," and the lack of evidence that she desired or imagined her writings coming into the public domain ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 444). Higginson reluctantly provides his commentary on and transcripts of Dickinson's private letters to him, to cater to public interest and to bring readers "so intimately near to the peculiar quality and aroma of her nature" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 444). If her peculiarity made her writings even more promotable and publishable, Higginson also found that "she interested [him] more in her . . . unregenerate condition," her "defiance of form, never through carelessness, and never precisely from whim, which so marked her" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 448, 446).¹⁰ Anticipating that this "wholly new and original poetic genius" would enter the American literary canon, Higginson used his writings to create "a place for a reclusive, aloof, idiosyncratic, even aristocratic poet who resists the temptation to participate in the corrupt American literary marketplace" ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 445, Dietzman 60). What Higginson could not have predicted was that Dickinson's forging of her authorial defiance through her negotiations with nineteenth-century celebrity culture set up her queer iconicity.

Quiet – Wild – Dickinson

Dickinson's personal and poetic defiance within her private correspondence and

interpersonal relationships has subsequently become a signature aspect of her posthumous reputation. The twentieth-century feminist scholars who cemented Dickinson's canonicity and increased her fame championed her as just such a socially defiant woman and artist. For them, Dickinson's reclusiveness and status as unmarried were a means of asserting control over her life and art and of resisting repressive gender ideals; her poetry in its content and form challenged male-dominated literary traditions and critiqued patriarchal norms that subordinated women to men (see White 65-84; Bennett 24-50, 150-180; Loeffelholz). Countering the sexist and male-centered approach of early criticism and biographies, scholars have demonstrated the fundamental and sustaining role women played in Dickinson's life and writings, and particularly the pivotal part Dickinson's sister-in-law Susan played. As a result, the nature of Dickinson's relationship with Susan has played an essential role in the development of feminist and LGBTQ+ scholarship.¹¹

The transference of scholarly and biographical insights about Dickinson's non-heteronormativity to recent popular cultural representations of the poet show the reach and scope of Dickinson's recalcitrant celebrity and the specific use to which it has been put to extend the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities. *A Quiet Passion*, *Wild Nights with Emily*, and *Dickinson* differently showcase Dickinson's defiance and provide their perspective on Dickinson's stylization of herself as a non-publishing, publicity-averse poet, and Higginson's subsequent publicization of this. Importantly, these works complicate Higginson's emphasis on her reclusive genius by showing her social connections, particularly her intellectual and erotic relationships with other women, in ways that realize potentials within feminist and LGBTQ+ scholarship. These recent screen adaptations present Dickinson as a queer ally whose defiant life and writings endorse LGBTQ+ lives. The reviews and emerging scholarship of these biopics underscore Dickinson's growing visibility as a twenty-first-century LGBTQ+ icon. What has not been discussed by commentators, however, is the connection between

Dickinson's queer iconicity and the stakes involved in making a woman who rejected mass-media attention into a twenty-first-century celebrity. These works are further illuminated by understanding Dickinson's (proto-)queer defiance of celebrity norms. Stylistically, she created an evasive, privacy-creating form of writing that initiates and yet resists types of intrusiveness associated with celebrity culture. Thematically, she privatizes celebrity characteristics such as uniqueness and defiance to ennoble herself as a figure who exists outside celebrity mass-media processes: unseen, unfamiliar, unnoticed.

A Quiet Passion, *Wild Nights with Emily*, and *Dickinson* highlight Dickinson's social and poetic rebelliousness as part of their queer appropriations of the poet. *Wild Nights with Emily* and *Dickinson* explicitly connect her revolutionary artistry with her sexual relationship with Susan Dickinson, while Terence Davies, the director of *A Quiet Passion*, identifies with Dickinson's model of dissidence and uses his version of her life story to represent his autobiographical experience of being a social outsider due to his sexuality. As Juan Barquin explains, because Davies relates to

“Dickinson's sense of longing, her questions of faith and identity, and yes, even her sexuality (however conservative the film might be on that front) makes for compelling storytelling. Her poetry and life become something to appropriate, a device with which to meditate on Davies' own insecurities about his career, recognition, love, and death. His pain becomes hers, and upon viewing, it becomes our own.”

The first half of *A Quiet Passion* presents Dickinson as a sociable, witty rebellious figure who openly refuses religious conformity and who, within her family and among her close friends, challenges social and gender conventions that reduced women to decorous subservience and chooses to accept family hierarchies over the inequalities of a marriage. The film's latter half depicts the poet's Christ-like suffering as the price she pays for her nonconformity, radical independence, and dedication to her art: she becomes a figure trapped in her father's house and

in her feelings of bitterness, loneliness, and vulnerability towards a world that she believes has rejected her.¹²

Despite his oeuvre's attention to homosexual representation, Davies ignores the homoerotic aspects of Dickinson's writings and overlooks the essential role of her sister-in-law Susan in her life. Instead, Davies's film shows Dickinson's availability as a figure whose life and writings can be made to communicate the experience of growing up queer in a repressive society where alienation, loneliness, and rejection, are the price of being different.¹³ This type of queer appropriation explains Davies's incorporation of the specter of the most famous queer icon of all, Oscar Wilde, into Dickinson's story. Evoking Wilde's comedies of manners, the film's early scenes involve the Dickinson sisters exchanging epigrams and paradoxes, first, with other members of their family, including their formidable Aunt Elizabeth, and later with their witty friend Vryling Buffam. Lines such as "Let's not be anything today except superficial . . . And superficiality should always be spontaneous. If it is studied, it is too close to hypocrisy" and "Going to church is like going to Boston. You only enjoy it after you've gotten home," imitate Wilde's aphoristic style. There is also a reference to the Irish dramatist's surname as Buffam marries Mr. Wilder, a Professor of Mathematics, who seems to be able to find comedy in a vulgar fraction. Dickinson's reprimand of Austin's "semi-recumbent position" before his mistress Mabel Loomis Todd alludes to Lady Bracknell's equivalent rebuke of Jack Worthing, "Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture," from act 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Wilde 331). The comically awkward tea scene between the Dickinson sisters and the Wadsworths parallels the similarly uncomfortable afternoon tea ceremony in Wilde's play between the love rivals Gwendolen and Cecily. The film's trajectory of Dickinson's life from the banter of social comedy to the devastation of individual tragedy mirrors the similar route of Wilde's life and writings from *The Importance of Being Earnest* to *De Profundis*. Dickinson's line "In the end, we all become the thing we most dread," which for

Davies describes the life-destroying effects of one's choices, echoes Wilde's refrain, "Yet each man kills the thing he loves," from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (Wilde 844). *A Quiet Passion* shows the way Dickinson's gender and sexual non-conformity facilitates Davies's queer identification that crosses gender and sexuality. In so doing, it occludes the prospect of a proto-lesbian Dickinson, even as its words mirror a canonically queer author and his work.

In contrast to Davies, the creators and writers of *Wild Nights with Emily* and *Dickinson* have gained much praise for their queer-affirming depiction of Dickinson's sexual relationship with her sister-in-law as the center of her life (see Nicholson, Nolfi, Schuseeler, Wilkinson). Drawing on Martha Nell Smith's scholarship, writer and director Madeleine Olnek presents Susan as Dickinson's lover, companion, confidant, and muse in a relationship that spans the poet's life from her adolescence to her death. *Wild Nights with Emily* traces the origins of a biographical tradition that has sidelined Susan and has erased their love story and companionship due to the self-serving machinations of Dickinson's first editor and her brother's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd. Rather than depict Dickinson as "a lonely, morose spinster who hovers over her American canon," Olnek makes Dickinson's reclusiveness a strategic pose behind which the poet can dedicate her life to her poetry and share her life and her poetry with Susan (Handler). While *Wild Nights with Emily* sets itself up as "a corrective to a story of lesbian erasure," and even depicts Dickinson's sexual relationship with another female friend, Kate Scott Anthon, *Dickinson*, focusing on the poet's early years, is "unabashedly queer" and anachronistically maps "twenty-first century understandings of sexual orientation [and its casual acceptance] onto Emily Dickinson's lived experience" (Russo 547, 546, see also Cote). For *Dickinson*'s creator Alena Smith, many of the show's characters, and not only Dickinson and Susan, "are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum" because, as she puts it, the "queer audience for *Dickinson* is our audience" (Gilchrist). *Dickinson* foregrounds male and female cross-dressing, gender-blurring characters, and same-sex kissing and dancing.

Viewers see Dickinson and Susan in bed together, fantasizing about marrying each other and raising a child together, and experiencing the heights of sexual pleasure. Their relationship is an open secret among their friends. However, Dickinson also has flirtatious interactions with George Gould and secret meetings with Death; she enters an anti-marriage pact with a seemingly gay Ben Newton; and she fantasizes about having sex with the captivating Samuel Bowles. The series reaches “the pinnacle of queer television” in a dream sequence in the third season, in which Dickinson meets Walt Whitman, who takes her to a New York gay bar where same-sex couples dance and kiss, and where Dickinson finally screams out for all to hear that she loves Susan (Raza-Sheikh). *Wild Nights with Emily* and *Dickinson* explicitly and *A Quiet Passion* implicitly signal the importance of Dickinson’s availability for queer expropriation.¹⁴

These screen adaptations of Dickinson’s life that have increased her celebrity, particularly as an LGBTQ+ icon of popular culture, address the concomitant issue of Dickinson’s relationship to fame and publication, with *Dickinson* attending most to her writing’s disorienting of celebrity’s dominant modes that make individuals, their images, and biographies publicly knowable. *A Quiet Passion* and *Wild Nights with Emily* locate Dickinson within a celebrity culture in which female performers and writers have made a name for themselves and generated controversy by exhibiting their talents. Assuming Dickinson sought to garner similar success and public recognition, these films blame those around her for not recognizing the value of her work, often owing to their sexist belittlement of women’s writing or their failure to understand Dickinson’s defiant style and subject matter.

A Quiet Passion points the blame at *Springfield Republican* editors Josiah Holland and Samuel Bowles. Holland reluctantly publishes her least “wayward” poem, believing only men create “permanent treasures of literature,” while Bowles edits her poems, which feels to her like “an attack” that achieves “obviousness” rather than “clarity.” In *A Quiet Passion*, when Charles Wadsworth describes Dickinson’s “wonderful poetry” as “remarkable and

uncompromising,” he asks her how she can be so stoical about not having published more than a few poems. She replies: “It’s easy to be stoic when no one wants what you have to offer. There is, I suppose, always posterity. But posterity is as comfortless as God.” For Davies’s Dickinson, “a posthumous reputation is only for those who, when living, weren’t worth remembering.” Part of Davies’s martyrdom of Dickinson is that she has not been “wracked by success” and despite wanting it she does not achieve “some approval before” her death. Recognizing he can torture his sister by evoking her sense of personal failure at living a “minor” life, Austin reminds Dickinson that despite her pretensions to artistry she has no reputation or “any public to speak of.” He also implies that rather than being exceptional her poetry is typical of the literature of misery, written usually by “poor, lonely and unhappy” women, who write “through a mist of tears” and whose unhealthy suffering “clouds, withers, distorts” what the poems describe.

Instead of presenting Dickinson as utterly dejected by a lack of recognition, *Wild Nights with Emily* depicts the poet as disappointed by those around her too obtuse to recognize her genius. During her meeting with Higginson, he, supposedly having read her poems, tells her: “Women’s voices are so seldom heard; we need to hear intelligent women’s voices. But I am barely able to find any.” When she asks him if he would publish her poems in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he refuses because he does not think they are suitable; he thinks her poems are too unclear and require radical editing. In contrast, Higginson champions Helen Hunt Jackson and makes her famous, even though Dickinson regards her as an inferior poet. Stressing how much it would mean to Dickinson to be published, Susan asks Bowles when he will publish more of Dickinson’s poems in the *Springfield Republican*. He dismissively replies, “I advised Emily not to seek publication in general,” adding that he thinks she needs to work on her rhymes. In a similar manner, Niles and Holland reject or ignore Dickinson’s poetry. While the indifference of the world destroys the poet in *A Quiet Passion*, the love and recognition provided by Susan

in *Wild Nights with Emily* sustains Dickinson. From the beginning, Susan promises that she will get her lover's work into print, reassuring her: "Emily, your poems are ever-marvelous to me. When you come to me, with your fresh pages, and I read them, they're full of things . . . things that are startling. . . . The way you write . . . it's new. People don't know what to make of it. They've never seen it before."

A Quiet Passion and *Wild Nights* set out to correct this neglect and misrepresentation of Dickinson's genius. However, the kind of queer recognition that these films insist on requires them to overlook important features of Dickinson's negotiations with nineteenth-century celebrity culture through which she set the terms of her own posthumous fame. They disregard her "penurious" refusal in the 1860s of two editors, perhaps Holland and Bowles, who wanted to give her "Mind" to "the World" (L261). They overlook the appreciation of figures such as Jackson, Niles, and others who attempted to persuade her to publish and Dickinson's use of Higginson and his writings to validate her determination not to appear in print. By emphasizing Dickinson's desire to publish rather than her refusals to enter the marketplace, these films can reinforce their own importance as finally giving the poet the acclaim and fame her contemporaries denied her.

Moreover, both films overlook aspects of their own narratives that further clarify Dickinson's sense of herself as a non-publishing poet. Late in *A Quiet Passion*, Dickinson accuses herself: "Oh, you are a wretched creature! Will you never achieve anything?" However, the film includes a voiceover of Dickinson reading "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260, M 128), in which the speaker foregrounds the dangers of dependency on public fame for personal validation and the subversiveness of being nobody, and "To fight aloud, is very brave - " (Fr138, M 79) and "There is a word" (Fr42, M 42), in which the speakers contrast public battles with unseen, unobserved, "noiseless" victories and defeats. These three poems are representative of many in which Dickinson thematizes the vital power of privacy,

hiddenness, and secrecy. In reply to Dickinson's regret, "I live a very quiet life. No one would know I was here," Lavinia evokes such themes, reminding her "But if you weren't, oh, what a chasm you would leave." Similarly, *Wild Nights with Emily* disregards evidence of Dickinson's role in her mythologization as an unusual, unique genius "who wrote her words in secret and did not show them to a soul," a myth that fascinated Mabel Loomis Todd and which she and Higginson used to market the poet. The film also overlooks its own demonstration of the importance of Dickinson's circulation of poems in and as letters as an alternative to publication through which she gains recognition and self-validation as a poet (see Smith, *Rowing* 15-16). For *Wild Nights with Emily* sharply contrasts the authenticity of the new type of poetry that originates from Dickinson's and Sue's domestic lives with the inauthenticity of a public sphere of publishing, promotion, public talks, and celebrity, associated with Todd, that sought to stifle innovative, female-centered expression.

While acknowledging how Dickinson's artistry has been misunderstood and overlooked, *Dickinson* makes the topic of fame one of its central themes and a key to her legacy. *Dickinson* details how the poet achieved posthumous renown not through her poems' sustained appearance in traditional print publications but through their dissemination to an influential circle which led to her achieving notability in Amherst and beyond. The show evokes the historical poet's tendency in her writings to unsettle clearly-delineated identities relating to fame and to promulgate the value of non-celebrity over celebrity, obscurity over recognition, and unknownness over being known. Moreover, *Dickinson's* anachronistic style aligns with how the poet's own disjunctive language favors the enticement of partial concealment and partial disclosure rather than the endeavor to fix meanings and identities. In the first episode, Dickinson is already known as a poet, genius, and "weirdo" among her Amherst friends, one of whom, George Gould, quotes "I dwell in Possibility - " (Fr466, M 233), even though she has not yet been published. Dickinson delights in such moments where

others quote from her poems. George is the first to publish her in an Amherst College magazine that he co-edits, and, throughout the show, he remains her biggest fan. Dickinson delights in Gould's expression of support in season three, episode three, when he states, "If I had to choose between you and your poems[,] . . . I'd choose your poems." Although Dickinson primarily shares her work with Susan, with whom she also shares the ambitions of never marrying and becoming a great writer, she shows some poems to Ben Newman who identifies her as a poet who will "write things . . . that the world will never forget" (season one, episode nine). When Dickinson becomes "a little bit famous" by publishing under her own name and later under her brother's, she experiences her father's violent disapproval of her wicked attempt to "build herself a literary reputation." As a result, she both desires and fears acclaim, and in a fantasy scene she imagines herself in a circus as "the greatest freak of them all: a female poet." The first season ends with Dickinson defiantly telling her father: "I am a poet. And I am not going to die. I am going to write hundreds, thousands of poems right here in this room. The greatest poems ever written. By Emily Dickinson. And there is nothing you can do to stop me." To which he responds: "Yes, Emily. I know."

Dickinson's three seasons position the poet in a world of celebrity culture comprising famous authors, architects, artists, performers, journalists, abolitionists, and former slaves who are written about, talked about, asked for autographs, interviewed, and pursued by fans. In this way, the show captures Dickinson's attraction to celebrity culture but also her defiance of its workings. In her writings, she "advertise[s]," and in her life, she embodies, an alternative to the celebrity identity: the socially invisible, mysterious "Nobody" (Fr260, M 128). In season two, Susan is a socially networked "influencer" who becomes a celebrity by hosting a salon at her home, the Evergreens, that brings together celebrities and fashionable New England society. Her soirees and their attendees are made famous by being written about in newspapers. Sue boasts "You know, people are going to talk about the fact that it was my salon where Sam

Bowles discovered Emily Dickinson. Where I helped him discover her.” Dickinson meets or fantasizes about meeting writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, and Walt Whitman, who all provide Dickinson with insight into issues relating to the writer’s role, reputation, and relationship to the marketplace. In the fourth episode of season one, disappointed after meeting and interviewing her literary hero Thoreau, Dickinson contrasts the fakery of his celebrity-authorship with her more difficult position as an unpublished writer: “You publish your books, which are full of misinformation, and yet people read them. They admire you; they interview you. Whereas everything I write I have to keep to myself. Try writing something and not showing it to anyone, then you’ll know what real loneliness feels like.” When Dickinson’s sense of alienation is heightened by those who, like Austin, point out that she is “not a real poet because the only real poems are the ones in books,” it is consistently lessened by the positive responses of those with whom she shared her manuscript poems, such as George, Susan, and Ben.

The second season especially sees Dickinson experience what fame might be like following her interactions with the *Springfield Republican* editor Bowles, a powerful promoter and champion of women writers. Even before he meets her, Bowles knows all about her and tells her he wants to “pluck her from obscurity” and put her in the spotlight as a front-page poet. Although Dickinson is attracted to the prospect of being remembered and fears being forgotten, she expresses her wariness directly when she recites “Fame is a fickle food” (Fr1702 M 666) to Bowles. Although she practices at being interviewed, perfects her celebrity look, and attends Susan’s salon as Bowles’s new discovery, she increasingly feels mastered and invaded by him. Dickinson realizes that fame might make an artist less creative and increasingly dependent on and controlled by the admiration, criticism, or changing tastes of admirers. She repeatedly sees Nobody/Frazer Stearns who warns her that she should not trust those who seek to make her poetry known because fame is not genuine and will destroy her.

These warnings are further heightened by her conversations with other celebrities. In episode four, the Central Park architect Frederick Law Olmsted tells her: “Opinion is a flitting thing. It’s a hideous distraction from the beauty of your craft . . . The work itself is the gift, not the praise for it. Understand that and you’ll understand true mastery.” In a similar manner, the exhausted and disillusioned international singing sensation Adelaide May underlines the benefits of remaining hidden over the transience of public renown: “If you're seen, then you're exposed. Everything that's exposed, well, it goes stale. . . . The critics, they'll put you on top for a minute, but then they'll drag you down. They'll get sick of you, and they'll destroy you. They hate you, see, because you made them love you.” When she meets the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe, he tells her fame is an addiction: “Get one little taste and look at you, you’re hooked. And you’ll keep searching for that next high . . . But it’ll never be enough.”

The aftermath of Bowles’s publication of her poem is distressing and disorientating for the poet: she is literally invisible on the one day she is supposed to be the center of attention and appreciation. While invisible, she witnesses the various ways her poems are read and she is viewed. Being famous means “[e]verybody just gets to talk about me regardless of whether or not what they say is true.” Tapping into the motif of the ghostly celebrity, Dickinson experiences fame as equivalent to death. By the end of season two, Dickinson realizes that, for her, celebrity would be dangerous and her destiny is not to be known. As Nobody/Frazer Stearns tells her, “You have wars to fight, Emily Dickinson. But you must fight them in secret. Alone. Unseen. You must give all the glory to yourself and ask for nothing from the world. You must be a nobody. The bravest, most brilliant nobody who ever existed.”¹⁵

Season three of *Dickinson* presents its eponymous heroine as less concerned with fame and more interested in the vital role poetry must have during the American Civil War. Through her circulation of her poems to friends and family, her reading them aloud at social gatherings, the publication of one poem anonymously in *Drum Beat*, a Union magazine, and her sending

poems to Higginson, who is on the battlefield, Dickinson witnesses the power of poetry to heal the wounds and divisions of war and to provide comfort and solace at a time of national conflict. She writes to Higginson not because she seeks fame but rather because she wants his opinion of her work's quality. Moreover, when Dickinson and Lavinia travel into the future, to 1955, and meet Sylvia Plath, Dickinson is shocked that her poems have been published, asking Lavinia, "I thought I told you to burn all my poems when I died." It becomes clear that it is Lavinia who does not want the world to "forget [her] sister." Dickinson is disturbed by her future fame and the way her private life and works are interconnected; she is as disconcerted by the idea that she "lived a sad, miserable life . . . was a virgin. A miserable, dried-up spinster . . . [who] [h]ardly even left her room," as by the rumors that she was "a sapphic, a homosexual, a woman who loved other women." At such moments, and in its attention to Dickinson's ambivalence towards and ultimately rejection of the value of fame, *Dickinson* foregrounds the dilemma of any biographical representation of a poet who chose privacy over publicity.

The final episode of *Dickinson* marks the poet's withdrawal from the realm of publicity through her refusal to see Higginson, who has come to meet the woman he regards as a literary genius. Instead, she determinately states: "I'm still going to write. Even if no one ever cares. Even if it makes absolutely no difference that there was a person named Emily Dickinson who sat . . . in this little room . . . day after day . . . and wrote things down just because she felt them." Having co-designed her white dress with the African American seamstress Betty, Dickinson attires herself in this uniform of creativity and secludes herself in her room to carry out the labor of writing and her domestic routines as the seasons change outside her window. The final image of Dickinson rowing towards an island of rainbow-colored mermaids (recalling the singing mermaid from the New York gay bar), shouting at them "Wait for me" shows Dickinson not moving towards a future of fame and recognition but journeying deeply into the language of her own poems and in this case into the fantastic imagery of "I started Early - Took

my Dog - ” (Fr656, M 311). The ending shows Alena Smith’s determination to present not a historically accurate portrait but one that uses anachronism to capture the spirit and voice of a poet who “embraces paradox and defies authority” (Waldman), to evoke a “magical outsider artist . . . an icon of someone who committed themselves to a life of art, even in the absence of recognition” (Valentini). The show’s close underlines the argument being made in this essay for connecting Dickinson’s queer iconicity and her cultural work as a *queer* celebrity. Dickinson did not simply shun celebrity culture, she queered its operations and categories to structure her nineteenth-century notability and emplace her future celebrity through a poetic form and motifs that celebrate the allurement of that which hides from view.

Conclusion:

When he read some of Dickinson’s letters to Higginson, Austin Dickinson suggested that his sister “posed” in them (Bingham 167). Higginson also recognized that her letters “show[ed] her mainly on her *exaltée* side” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 453). A neighbor, E. Winchester Donald, went further to imply that Dickinson’s letters show how she internalized the processes through which celebrity culture blurs distinctions between public and private life:

Though no one saw her in her garden, she seems never to have been without one spectator. One eye on flower, bee, grass, tree, heaven, the other steadily upon herself. I can’t fancy her using the mirror as we do, she had seen herself too often. Not that she was a *poseuse* that implies an audience — but she did attitudinize for her own pleasure (Bingham 314).

This account typifies Dickinson’s queering of celebrity culture’s expectations and identities: at her most private, she is most public. Bonnie Carr O’Neill’s research provides one explanation for these repeated patterns in her writings. O’Neill notes that the era’s female celebrities, such as Fanny Fern, drew attention to the fact that “all women [were] ‘public women’ such as

herself”: a female celebrity “experiences a magnified version of the scrutiny all women face” because “their fulfilment of conventional gender roles and duties requires [their] vigilant attention to their behavior and appearance before others and subjects them to others’ observations and judgment” (157). This gender-inflected experience of always being subject to the gaze of an omnipresent scrutinizing public may help explain her penchant for unsettling celebrity culture’s protocols. Another explanation might be that Dickinson’s sense of herself as being pursued by fame accentuated her evasive writing style, even in her most private correspondence, and her increasingly stringent control of any interpersonal contact.

Despite her determination to shun mass-media attention and avoid the trappings of publicity that would have commodified her personality, appearance, and private life, Dickinson incorporates core ideas relating to celebrity into her life and writings. As she believed that fame would finally catch up with her, she bequeathed to history the legacy of an opaquely defiant privacy (see Clark). Dickinson’s twentieth- and twenty-first-century admirers reenact Higginson’s fascination and frustration with her ambiguity and indeterminacy, showing that where Dickinson is concerned “the potential for reader enchantment is in precise relation to that reader’s inability to attain the satiated fulfillment of his or her hermeneutic desire” (Smith, *Seduction* 6). This essay’s discussion of *A Quiet Passion*, *Wild Nights with Emily*, and *Dickinson*, foregrounds the possibilities for LGBTQ+ identifications, connections, and challenges to gender and sexual norms opened up by the poet and her signature obliqueness, indirection, and elusiveness in her engagements with celebrity culture of her time as exemplified in her letters to and personal interactions with Higginson. Assuming Dickinson sought and was denied fame in her lifetime, *A Quiet Passion* and *Wild Nights with Emily* avoid explicit confrontation with the other side of Dickinson’s queer celebrity: her unsettling of the norms and expectations of fame. In contrast, *Dickinson* explores the fascinating topic of Dickinson’s choice of obscurity as well as showing the poet “meticulously constructing her

legacy through poems that stowed away the infinite in the small” (Waldman). *Dickinson* challenges a twenty-first-century celebrity-obsessed culture with the dangers and entrapments of fame and celebrates a poet who recognized that “the world runs on invisible things” and that “being invisible” gives one power.

Notes

¹ See Van Waarden for a discussion and definition of the anti-celebrity celebrity. As Van Waarden explains “the prefix of ‘anti’ [is used] to signal both animosity and indifference towards celebrities, as well as uncharacteristic manifestations of celebrity. This anticelebrity is generally used to construct a contrast with celebrities and celebrity culture, and is arguably achieved through a display of ‘authenticity’ and an avoidance of publicity” (5).

² See Gordon’s account of how Dickinson’s posthumous reputation was crafted, in one way, by Mabel Loomis Todd and later her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, and, in another way, by Susan Dickinson and later her daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi. This conflict over the poet’s legacy, as Gordon explains, “originated in the clash between Austin Dickinson and his wife, who had been the poet’s intimate and her keenest reader. Out of this clash a lasting feud developed, and it was the opponents in this feud, their allies and warring descendants, who devised the image of the poet as her fame grew and endured. What began as a split over adultery

turned into a feud over who was to own the poet: in the first instance, who was to have the right to publish her works; in the second, whose legend would imprint itself on the public mind” (6).

³ For examples of recent scholarship on nineteenth-century celebrity cultures on both sides of the Atlantic, see Blake, Easley, and O’Neill. Recent Dickinson scholars have built on these developments to provide an important new context for discussing Dickinson’s response to famous figures, her attitudes to mass-media fame, and her cultural afterlife and celebrity (see Crumbley, editor). Similarly, a recent collection of essays by Elizabeth Dinny and Jeannette Schollaert importantly delineates Dickinson’s posthumous celebrity and her role in popular culture, focusing on how the poet and images, objects, and stories associated with her have been reimagined by editors, biographers, writers, directors, performers, musicians, and designers to suit changing public tastes and satisfy audience demand.

⁴ My use of the term “queer” derives from Donald Hall’s definition of “queer” as an adjective meaning “to abrade the classifications, to sit athwart conventional categories or traverse several” (13) and as a verb focused on “putting pressure on simplistic notions of identity and . . . disturbing the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity, sexual identity in particular” (14). For McCann and Monaghan “queering” is about resisting and challenging traditional categories and expectations and foregrounding the non-normative: “The fundamental idea of queer theory as resistant to fixed categorisations has meant that the theory has and continues to be applied far beyond questions of sexuality” (4). They also note queer theory’s application to issues relating to race, nationality, and class (185). In her writings, Dickinson queers celebrity by disordering her era’s shared understanding of public fame and using and unsettling its key ideas to fashion herself as a fascinating outsider to its processes.

⁵ Dickinson scholars like Robert Smith have characterized the encounters her contemporaries and later readers have with her and her texts through a language of tease, seduction, and allurement. This essay attaches the erotics Smith describes to celebrity culture’s blurring of the

deeply private with the deeply public; it builds on his ideas, including his discussions of Dickinson's exchanges with Higginson (63-67). As was typical of her engagements with male contemporaries, Dickinson produced "a female discourse of linguistic disruptiveness as a very specific act of rebellion against dominant patriarchal structures of communication" (59). To be taken seriously by public men such as Higginson, Dickinson used a language designed "to effect a rhetorical seduction" that was "the means to a delicate inversion of the gender power hierarchy figured in the social relationship of Dickinson and her male correspondent" (61).

⁶ For example, the *Springfield Republican* informed readers that the leading article in the April issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* would be Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor," adding that it "ought to be read by all the would-be authors of the land . . . It is a test of latent power. Whoever rises from its thorough perusal strengthened and encouraged, may be reasonably certain of ultimate success" (Leyda II 50). If anything Higginson became more famous over the course of Dickinson's correspondence with him, with the *Springfield Republican* providing information about his publications (Leyda II 79, 95, 120, 134-5); his Civil War accomplishments (Leyda II 39, 71, 72, 75, 76, 81, 82, 93, 101); his support of female suffrage (Leyda II 133-4, 136, 145); his public lecturing (Leyda II 123, 126, 136, 138-9); and aspects of his private life (Leyda II 298-9).

⁷ Reflecting Higginson's status as a prominent lecturer (Leyda II 174) and respected essayist (Leyda II 180, 185), *The Round Table*, in 1864, published a feature on "Mr Higginson's Home" in a section on "Homes of New England Authors": "This ever welcome writer—now soldier—lives in Worcester, Mass., and in a home that has all the comforts and refinements that taste can suggest. A happier man is seldom met with . . . He has a delightful home, and is himself an everflowing fountain of joviality, wit, welcome, and happiness" (Leyda II 89).

⁸ Noting that Higginson would be giving the Phi Beta Kappa oration at Brown University on "Literature as an Art," the *Springfield Republican*, on 7 September 1867, described him as "a

tall, finely formed man with a good voice and a very graceful manner” (Leyda II 126). Similarly, in 1869, when he spoke at the Free Religion Society the *Republican* noted: “Col T. W. Higginson, of the executive committee, is one of the most noticeable men in the association. He looks as he writes, muscular, intense, every inch in earnest. He is tall, black haired and whiskered, graceful in motion, emphatic in speech” (Leyda II 138). Although it is unclear if Dickinson had a photograph of Higginson, such items in the *Republican* ensured she was aware that Higginson’s physical appearance “speaks individuality and heroism” (Leyda II 148): his face is “firm and true” and “when he speaks, how we listen to the crisp flow of the pure thoughts, feeling their truth, because he, himself, feels their truth” (Leyda II 157). In 1862, when Susan Dickinson asked Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Republican*, about acquiring photographs of famous writers, she was disappointed to learn that Higginson had not yet been photographed even though she thought she remembered seeing a photograph of him (Leyda II 46).

⁹ Dickinson’s exposure to her era’s commodification of bodies and identities influenced her reluctance about entering the mass-media marketplace by publishing her work; however, she laid the foundations for her posthumous fame by assembling most of her manuscript poems into booklets, many of which she bound, and by circulating poems to an influential coterie of admirers, including Higginson, who would play key roles in her legacy (see Eberwein et al xiii-xiv, xvi). In a June 7, 1862 letter to Higginson, Dickinson told him: “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish’ - that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin - If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase - and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me - then - My Barefoot-Rank is better - ” (JL265). Her comment implies that she did not write poetry primarily to publish it; that she believed if one is destined to be famous, one cannot evade this fate; and that chasing fame is a potentially embarrassing activity. Instead, through her admirers, Dickinson found a way of

maintaining her “Barefoot-Rank” while pursuing literary immortality circuitously in a manner that would embarrass nobody, not even her dog. While separating her pursuit of literary immortality from the perils of nineteenth-century publicity, Dickinson gained notice in her lifetime by drawing on, and disordering, celebrity discourse.

¹⁰ Higginson and Todd are often remembered as Dickinson’s “graceless editor[s],” who “pilloried” her work (Wineapple, *White Heat* 281, 284). However, Wineapple notes that after the 1890 edition Higginson changed his mind. He believed that Dickinson’s audience was “adequately prepared” and that she “could now appear as herself—without editorial mangling—but Mable continued to rework the *Poems* for the new editions, tweaking rhymes and adjusting grammar. Higginson protested. Such changes must stop. ‘Let us alter as little as possible, now that the public’s ear is opened,’ he would tell her as they began selecting poems for the second volume. He meant it. Mabel did not listen” (*White Heat* 291-2).

¹¹ Scholars such as Lillian Faderman, Paula Bennett, Rebecca Patterson, Judith Farr, Ellen Louise Hart, Martha Nell Smith, and Vivian R. Pollak have contributed to a critical tradition that emphasizes the poet’s gender and sexual nonconformity. Pioneering biographical studies that stress the crucial role her sister-in-law played in her life and writings (see Hart and Smith) have made that relationship a recurring topic in feminist scholarship, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory. For some scholars, Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law was typical of the kinds of passionate or romantic friendship that existed between women during the nineteenth century which sometimes bordered on the homoerotic (Faderman 15-20); for others, the relationship might be termed “lesbian” because Dickinson’s emotional and erotic orientation towards Susan “surpasses in depth, passion, and continuity” stereotypical exchanges between female friends at this time (Hart and Smith xiv; Smith, *Rowing* 21-30).

¹² In the film, Dickinson’s quiet passion is the poetry that she writes and sews into booklets at night, with her father’s permission, in a manner that disturbs no one. However, the film’s title

also refers to her Christ-like suffering for her social defiance. One of the first poems heard in the film captures this point: “For each extatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the extasy - ” (Fr109, M 77). For generally positive reviews of Davies’s film, see Wakefield, Garrett, and Guerra. In contrast, for Brenda Wineapple, “Davies’s Dickinson is at last a hopeless female neurotic, misunderstood, craving fame, taking no real risks, and masking her multiple fears with an illusion of independence. For despite marvelous costumes, this costume drama never quite lays aside the trappings of stereotype” (“Terence Davies, *A Quiet Passion*”). Many viewers would share Rachel Handler’s apt critique of Davies’ film, especially in his decision not to engage with Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law. Those who have defended Davies in this regard stress the autobiographical nature of his films (see Van de Velde, Di Mattia). Davies himself highlights his personal identification with the poet and his mapping of his own life and its suffering onto hers (see Garcia, Haun).

¹³ The fantasy sequence in *A Quiet Passion*, in which Dickinson imagines a silhouetted man mounting her stairs at midnight and nearing but never entering her bedroom, exemplifies Davies’s queer appropriation of Dickinson. He is drawn to the idea of Dickinson “wait[ing] all [her] days” for this “bridegroom” whom she believes will “come before the afterlife.” The non-arrival of this mythical male figure could be read as symbolizing Davies’s own unfulfilled erotic, spiritual, and worldly desires.

¹⁴ For discussion of levels of resistance to Dickinson’s queer celebrity, see Juster and Bartram. For a discussion of the multiple eroticisms of Dickinson’s poetry, see Hanneberg.

¹⁵ *Dickinson* in its emphasis on the power of being invisible does not just tap into ideas in Dickinson’s writings, it also draws on themes that were central to the works of many of the female literary celebrities she most admired: the Brontës, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot. *Dickinson* and the other recent biopics visually or textually reference her admiration for these writers, whom she knew focused on and celebrated those figures,

especially women, whose accomplishments remained concealed and yet whose effect on those around them was “incalculably diffusive.” As Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), one of Dickinson's favorite novels, concluded: “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts ... [and] is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (838).

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- JL *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, Harvard UP, 1958. 3 vols. Citation by letter or prose fragment number.
- M *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*, edited by Cristanne Miller, Harvard UP, 2016. Citation by page number.

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