

## The Variants of Emily Dickinson

by Rachael Harbourne

Emily Dickinson was one of the most prolific female poets of the nineteenth century. She wrote nearly 1,800 poems in her lifetime, but only about a dozen of them were published while she was alive. After her death in 1886 at the age of 55, her younger sister Lavinia found the rest of Dickinson's poems and hand-bound fascicles. About four years after Dickinson's death, the first volume of these poems were published and very quickly attracted significant attention amongst people across the country. With each volume that was published, scholars became increasingly fascinated with the style of Dickinson's writing and began to examine her poetry with a meticulous eye. Over the years, scholars and various poets alike have poured over Dickinson's fascicles, not only deciphering her handwriting, but examining her grammatical choices and style of writing as well.

While some scholars believe that Dickinson's ability to incorporate variants into a number of her poems was the only way that allowed her to create new ways of interpreting her poems and deviate from the more formalistic style of nineteenth century poetry, other Dickinson specialists believe that it was these variants, mixed with her unique form of grammar and style of writing that allowed her to create different meanings within her various poems. It is quite interesting that both Dickinson's use of grammar and variants allowed her to create such ambiguity within her works; through examining both of her styles of crafting poetry, my goal is to unlock more insight into the way Dickinson contemplated life, and if there was, indeed, any purpose to these variants and how they were incorporated in her ever-changing notions. I will also be discussing how the poems that Dickinson included variants in not only allowed her to create new ways for others to read her poetry, but how it further allowed her to change the

meanings of her poems long after she thought they were completed. I will be examining some of the poems of which variants have had the most impact on as well as exploring various arguments made by Sharon Cameron, Eleanor Elson Heginbotham, and Mary Carney, regarding Dickinson's variants. I will also examine the arguments made regarding Dickinson's grammatical choices throughout her poetry as well, made by Paul Crumbley, and how these choices impacted Dickinson's variants as well; this will allow further in-depth analyses of Dickinson's poetic choices and what they have meant for her timeless poetic voice.

In regards to Emily Dickinson, the word *variant* is used to describe alternative words or modifications of sentences and/or specific stanzas within Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson was the one of the first poets to create variants for her poems, and during her early life as a poet, this style of writing was quite unusual; not very many people took very kindly to it. As Susan Cameron states in one of her opening chapters of *Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*, "Amplified Context", the styles of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, were grouped into the more "traditional" style of poetry, while Dickinson's poems were grouped into "'portfolio' poetry," which, according to "traditional" poets, was unpublishable. While Dickinson wasn't too keen on the idea of publishing all of the poems she wrote, many of Dickinson's poem weren't published because of this exact idea of her "'portfolio' poetry", as well as the idea of her "manuscript" style of printing (as Dickinson preferred to create fascicles rather than leave her poems loose or bind them all in one single book). However, if Dickinson had chosen to write in the more traditional, accepted style of poetry, it would have "violated the characteristics" that made Dickinson's poetry so unique and noteworthy; it was her "grammar, syntax, style, capitalization, variants, [and her] insistent absence of titles" that allowed Dickinson's poetry to hold as much ambiguity and mystery as it did (Cameron 53). Further, the

incorporation of Dickinson's variants allowed her to expand on her ideals without making "right" or "wrong" statements, or outright arguments, especially in regards to her beliefs and thoughts on religion.

Concerning her variants, it can be claimed that these modifications were simply created as additions to her poems, and/or used to help the meanings of her poems become clearer to readers; some may claim that they were nothing more than flourishes in her writing. Arguably, these variants can be identified as the primary clues to finding the truest interpretations of her poems. Dickinson was never truly finished with her work and was constantly evolving her pieces to fit to the way she felt during each moment of her life. Cameron analyzes the idea that perhaps Dickinson did not necessarily want to change the meanings of her poems entirely, but that the variants were reformed thoughts that Dickinson simply could not choose between.

On the one hand, it is quite possible that Dickinson meant for the variants to be read as co-existing words, simply meant to add to the meaning of her poems. Rather than a complete substitute, a variant could add more depth or emotion to any poem. Cameron states that while this more "casual" approach might be taken to reading the variants, Dickinson could very well have meant for these words to be substitutions to her original works, or at least "potential substitutions" (Cameron 64). These potential substitutions could be taken as a transformation of sorts within the persona displayed in Dickinson's poems that are either "suggested rather than negotiated" or "[implies] a transformation unambiguously enacted" (Cameron 66). Dickinson's choice to not explicitly choose the final meaning to these poems allows for a variety of different meanings to be imbued upon each poem. For example, a poem that shows a slight transformation in the persona of the speaker rather than a transformation in the meaning of the poem itself, is represented in the first stanza of Poem 109:

Of Bronze – and Blaze  
 The North – tonight –  
 So adequate – it forms –  
 So preconcerted with itself –  
 [5] So distant – to alarms –  
 An Unconcern so sovereign  
 To Universe, or me –  
 Infects my simple spirit  
 With Taints of Majesty –  
 [10] Till I take vaster attitudes –  
 And strut upon my stem –  
 Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,  
 For Arrogance of them – (Miller, Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved  
 Them 152)

In this poem, Dickinson is describing the Northern Lights, which could quite possibly be an analogy for Heaven. She describes them as a sight of beauty and mystery to behold by all who see them, “sovereign” and “Universe” alike. The speaker in this poem seems to be utterly captivated by the lights, as they “infect [her] simple spirit.” They seem to captivate her so much that she eventually loses sense of herself in the power of the lights, and “[takes] vaster attitudes” to everyone and everything around her. The haughtiness within the speaker’s tone of voice shows that she has begun to value herself at the level that people value the Northern Lights, or with a god-like persona, and “[disdains] Men, and Oxygen, / For Arrogance of them–.”

In Dickinson’s second version, the variation she has included in the first stanza is in the tenth line:

[10] Till I take vaster manners –  
 And strut upon my stem –  
 Disdaining Men, and Oxygen –  
 For Arrogance of them –

This variation of “attitudes” to “manners” gives the speaker of Dickinson’s poem a more respectful persona than the former version. Rather than “take vaster attitudes,” the speaker

almost seems humbled by the powers of the Northern Lights, rather than feeling as though she holds just as much “Majesty” as the lights themselves. While the speaker still “struts upon [her] stem” and “[disdains] men, and oxygen,” she does so with etiquette and grace, knowing full well that she is still a “simple spirit” within the world. While she strives to be as great as the lights, she knows that she will never hold the immense power she believes the lights to have; she will hold the expectations for herself higher than those who do not have the same respect that the speaker believes the Northern Lights needs to be given, and “[disdain] men and Oxygen” who’s “arrogance” overwhelms their respect. In regards to the comparison of the Northern Lights to Heaven, the speaker could then appear to be “[taking] vaster manners” and spreading the knowledge of Heaven and God to those filled with “disdain” and “arrogance”.

There are also those poems that Dickinson has added variations to that seem to change the poem in its entirety based off of the version one examines. One of Dickinson’s poems in particular, is in Fascicle 24, Sheet 3, and contains three variants for three different lines – these three variants alone change the entire meaning. “There is a pain – so utter”, more commonly referred to as Poem 599, is as follows:

There is a pain – so utter –  
 It swallows substance up –  
 Then covers the Abyss with Trance –  
 So Memory can step  
 [5] Around – across – upon it –  
 As One within a Swoon –  
 Goes safely – where an open eye –  
 Would drop Him – Bone by Bone (Miller, Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She  
 Preserved Them 252)

Within this poem, the speaker has come to the realization that pain is far greater than anything in the world, and has the power to consume everything and everyone – once it has consumed everything, it blocks the memory of the pain it has caused so that we can continue to

move forward in life. However, though our minds become encased in a “trance”, the pain is still there, and the slightest of missteps will bring it all rushing back with a strength that would cause one to fall apart “Bone by Bone.” This trance like state allows our eyes to be shielded from the full extent that the power of pain creates within each person – without full sight to see the truths of the world, we are protected from the worst pain we could feel. In the second version of Poem 599, the variations create a harsher tone, one that would be more akin to a person literally falling apart from the pain they experience, as there is nothing there that can truly shield them from it:

There is a pain – so utter –  
 It swallows Being up –  
 Then covers the Abyss with Trance –  
 So Memory can step  
 [5] Around – across – upon it –  
 As One within a Swoon –  
 Goes steady – where an open eye –  
 Would spill Him – Bone by Bone (Miller, Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She  
 Preserved Them 252)

Right off the bat, Dickinson has chosen to be more explicit with whom exactly she is talking about – the word substance, presented in the first variation, could mean anything; a substance could be a person, but it could also very well be thoughts and emotions, or even an aspect of nature. When Dickinson decides to change it to “Being” in the second variation, it is clear now, that the poem is referring to the state of mind of a person. Not only does Dickinson outright mention that pain swallows up a “Being”, rather than just substances, but that the pain “spills” people “Bone by Bone.” This is a far more graphic image than simply “drop[ing] Him.” While being dropped from someplace, “Bone by Bone” still infers something quite graphic, the image becomes all the more gruesome as these bones are now spilled.

When I examine this variant, I imagine the imagery as a carnal battle between a person and the material manifestation of the pain they experience throughout their lifetimes, whether it

be physical or mental/emotional pain. Though walls are built up to shroud a “Being” from their pain, memories will find a way to push through the “trance”. The act of spilling invokes an image of war upon the persona in the poem – they are afflicted with a pain so great, that even with “steady” movements, their eyes will eventually open up to the pain, and seeing the true light of it, the “Being” will then be spilled out of themselves from the sheer force of its power.

It appears as though many of Dickinson’s poetry, like Poem 599, are quite violent in their variations. This makes me ponder the idea of Dickinson’s experiences in life as she grew older; it seems that the older Dickinson became, the more she saw the violence of the world rather than the innocence it once might have held for her as a child. In Mary Carney’s essay, “Dickinson’s Poetic Revelations: Variants as Process” from the *Emily Dickinson Journal*, she explores similar ideas of the evolution of Dickinson’s poems through her variants. She argues that while Dickinson paid close attention to the formation of her poems, she might have been more interested in “the process of creation and self-expression” (Carney).

Carney explores another interesting idea regarding Dickinson’s choice of words and her inclusion of variants – Dickinson’s style of writing varied quite differently when it came to her “public” (published) poems and her “private” (unpublished) poems. Carney observes how Dickinson seemed to write more eloquently in the poems she sent out for publication: fewer dashes, a “more accepted form of punctuation,” as well as how much violence versus innocence she incorporated in her poems. This goes along with the idea that Dickinson’s “non-traditional” form of poetry was not widely excepted during her time, and so she had to find ways to get those poems that she actually wanted to share out into the world of the public. Whether that meant she must exclude or change some of her more grammatically styled poems, she did so in order to get her voice heard. As Carney states further along in her journal article, “Dickinson increased her

use of variants over time,” more than likely as a way to keep her originality in the poems the printing press wanted changed. As time passed and Dickinson learned more about what her writing style consisted of, these variants became something much more than simply a preservation of her original thoughts.

The themes of Dickinson’s poems focus specifically on the similarities and differences that both science and religion share. While each of her poems are mainly focused on either science or religion, there are a few poems that focus on both ideals together. One poem in particular that catches my attention is a single stanza, four-line poem:

Faith is a fine invention  
 For Gentleman who *see* –  
 But *Microscopes* are prudent  
 In an Emergency! (Miller, Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them  
 119)

Here, this poem examines the correlation between science and religion, and points out the faults of practicality that Dickinson believes religion has – this poem also shows Dickinson’s confidence and trust in science over this “Faith” she states has been invented by only those who can “see”. This poem itself has a variation to it, one that follows a more grammatical structure than “true” variants that change whole words and phrases. The subsequent poem is as follows:

“Faith” is a fine invention  
 For Gentlemen who *see*!  
 But *Microscopes* are prudent  
 In an Emergency! (Miller, Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them  
 137)

The major differences between this poem and the former are in the first, second, and third lines – in the first line of both versions, the word “Faith” stays the same, but is held by quotation marks in the second version. In the second line, the word “see” is italicized in both versions, but rather than a dash following immediately after the word, an exclamation point is placed for



emphasis instead. The difference in the third line is the word “Microscope”, which is italicized in the first version, but does not follow the same format in the second. While these differences might be overlooked, it is important to note that even with minor changes, the tone of the poem has completely changed.

The first version of the poem seems to be spoken in a more practical tone of voice, stating that while indeed faith might be something to look upon and further investigate, the practicality of science and tangible “*Microscopes*” will be a much better option for people in the long run. However, the tone of voice in the second variation of the poem seems to take on a more sarcastic attitude towards religion rather than a factual one. The quotations around “Faith” implies that it is something that people shouldn’t take seriously; adding an exclamation point at the end of the italicized “see” only adds further mockery to “Faith” and “Gentleman” who believe that they can see such ideologies. Growing up, Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which taught her both the importance of science and religion. While Dickinson was greatly interested in the scientific world, she was skeptical of the religious one, and refused to conform to the standards that were put in place for young Christian women. While she felt no particular affiliation to the religious world, she was interested in the ideals of it.

In *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them*, edited by Crisianne Miller, there are a total of 450 poems that include variants throughout her 40 fascicles (of which I will go into further detail as the essay progresses). There are a wide variety of these modified poems presented in each fascicle; some fascicles include only 4 variant poems, while others hold up to 20. It appears, here, that Dickinson’s placement of variants was sporadic and random in terms of order and organization, especially as there are no titles for these fascicles (just like there are no titles to her poems), except by their number (e.g., Fascicle 1, Fascicle 2, etc.).

The length of Dickinson's poems ranges from one stanza and two lines, while others read as long as 12 stanzas and fifty lines; despite the irregularity, each of Dickinson's poems were thoughtfully crafted and pieced together. She hand-bound many of these poems into 40 fascicles, which were small booklets containing a group of poems, many of which seem to be placed together in random orders. There are also a number of poems that were not bound in any of these fascicles and just left loose as single poems – it is unclear what the reason for that might have been, but it is possible that the poems in each fascicle had some sort of correlation with one another, something that Cameron continues to discuss at length.

Dickinson's fascicles and the choices she made whilst piecing them together are quite interesting in the sense that within these 40 fascicles, there is no acute theme being presented. Rather than present fascicles that explore the different facets of religion, the purity of nature, or even the advancement and revolution of science, they seem to be placed in whichever order Dickinson just so happened to pick them up by – the poems seem to be quite random with no correlation to one another, except for the fact that some of them are written with variants. Upon further investigation and close scrutiny of these fascicles, Cameron has found a few correlations within many of the fascicles and the poems that each of them hold.

As Cameron points out on page 70 in her chapter on "Variants", it is possible for specific variants in one line to be modifications for variants in another, creating an entirely new outlook on that particular poem. Further along, Cameron makes an interesting point about how various poems grouped together in the same fascicle could be actually be variants for one another. She poses the question that if different variants within a poem could affect that of another, or even relate on some level, is it not entirely possible that whole poems might be variants for one another. If this is what Emily Dickinson had in mind, that it can be presumed that each poem she

placed in her 40 fascicles were deliberately picked in regard to keeping the variants together. Similarly, Eleanor Elson Heginbotham, author of *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibilities*, examines the possibility that not only do these fascicles Dickinson created make it easier for readers to follow her poems, but it allows them to have a better understanding into the sequence of how Dickinson meant for each poem to be read in the first place. These 40 fascicles are some of the only pieces of Dickinson's brain that scholars and readers alike can pick through. While she did not leave behind the meanings to each of her poems and variants, these fascicles are almost like clues left behind by Dickinson, in order to begin to decipher her poems.

While there are not many poems found in Dickinson's collections such as this next one, amongst her uses of variants words throughout a number of her poems, Dickinson sometimes crafted entire poems to be variants for another one in her collection, just as Cameron and Heginbotham had explored. One of the most prominent of these poems is depicted in Fascicle 16, titled Poem 446, and is as follows:

He showed me Hights I never saw –  
 “Would’st Climb” – He said?  
 I said, “Not so.”  
 “With me” – He said – “With me?”

[5] He showed me secrets – Morning’s nest –  
 The Rope the Nights were put across –  
 “And now, Would’st have me for a Guest?”  
 I could not find my “Yes” –

[10] And then – He brake His Life – and lo,  
 A light for me, did solemn glow –  
 The steadier, as my face withdrew  
 And could I further “No”? (Cameron 81)

This particular poem holds a single variant within itself in line 11:

[11]       The larger – as my face withdrew  
               And could I further “No”?

This poem, in particular, depicts the story of a young girl being courted by a passionate young man. However, despite her lover’s affections, she feels none of the same emotions for him that he expresses so insistently. It seems as though it would have been a perfect love story, as the young man “showed [her] Hights [she] never saw” and “showed [her] secrets” she might never have known. Despite how seemingly perfect their love could be, she can not seem to fall for him, as she know she probably should. She cannot seem to “find [her] Yes.”

Upon further examination of this poem, it seems to me that the persona in this poem is in fact Emily Dickinson herself, and the young man who is courting her is God. Every “He” is capitalized when it appears in the poem, and as this is the correct and respectful way of referring to God, her struggle to “find [her] Yes” could be her struggle to find her place in the Christian religion. God’s question to her of “Would’st climb?” is denied by Dickinson when He “[shows her] Hights [she] never saw;” she says “Not so” and when He asks even “With me?” she still does not answer. And yet, it seems that, despite Dickinson’s reluctance to accept religion, God still leaves a place for her in His heaven, as “a light for [her], did solemn glow.” The persona within the poem has a final thought, a revelation of sorts, that, as God recedes from her and this light glows stronger, she wonder whether or not she might continue to say no to the idea of religion – perhaps now that she sees the divine powers God obtains, her fear of the unknown gives way to awe and veneration.

The variant to this poem was not published during Dickinson’s lifetime, but was sent by Dickinson to her sister Susan. The variant poem is as follows:

I showed her Hights she never saw –  
 “Would’st Climb” – I said?

She said – “Not so” –  
 “With *me* –” I said – With *me*?  
 [5] I showed her secrets – Morning’s Nest –  
 The Rope the Nights were put across –  
 And *now* – “Would’st have me for a Guest?”  
 She could not find her Yes –  
 And then, I brake my life – And Lo,  
 [10] A Light, for her, did solemn glow,  
 The larger, as my face withdrew –  
 And *could* she, further, “No”? (Cameron 81-82)

Examining this poem from the opposite perspective of the first poem, the persona of the young man represented in this variation seems to be that of God. While in the previous poem, Dickinson is struggling to find her own place in the Christian religion, even as God shows her a path she could take, this variation shows God’s own struggle in trying to show Dickinson the way. While God is not forcing her onto a religious path, He is showing her the possibilities available to her were she to open her mind up to the idea of religion. In the previous poem, the tone of voice from the speaker seems to be nonchalant and dismissive, only changing at the end of the poem to show a little bit of interest about the possibilities of her future. The variant poem accentuates the kind of pleading tone in the persona of God’s voice as he tries in vain, not only to understand why Dickinson won’t pay him any mind, but why she has also shut down his advances. One of the most interesting pieces of this variant poem to me is the italicized portions of the poem: “*me*”, “*now*”, and “*could*”. To me, the purpose of these three words being written in italics is to really show readers the kind of desperation this courting type of voice seems to have. He (God) wants so badly for Dickinson to at least pay him some attention and listen to what he has to say, and doesn’t quite understand why she can’t open up let him in. Both of these poems, when read one after the other, can be examined as a kind of conversation occurring between both sides of the party – speaking to one particular person, the narrator of each poem is

recalling their experiences with a failed courtship (either romantic, or in the case of the religious interpretations, spiritual).

One can examine not only the variants presented in this poem, but also the grammar Dickinson chose to use as well. One of the most unique forms of Dickinson's grammar is found in the use of her dashes. In both Poem 446 and its variant, the dashes really come into play; the dashes seem to play the role of hesitation on Dickinson's side of the poem, and confusion on God's side of the poem. As Paul Crumbley discusses in his book, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* these various dashes could help to decipher some of Dickinson's more radical and complex poems. Dickinson was one of the only poets of her time to use punctuation so sporadically in her poems, as it seemed at the time. Some of her poems include so many dashes, that they seem to be entirely made up of this interesting style of punctuation, for example, Poem 446. Typically used as an interruption in conversation or one's own thoughts, it poses the question as to what exactly these dashes meant to Dickinson. Was she using them in the disruptive way they were meant, or had she come up with her own interpretation and definition of them?

It is unclear whether or not Dickinson varied the lengths of her dashes on purpose, or whether she paid them any attention at all while she was caught up in writing her prose. I look at these dashes as a sort of variation within Dickinson's poems; Crumbley agrees with me in the sense that he also believes Dickinson's dashes to be variants of their own kind. As scholars like Crumbley have noticed, some of the dashes in Dickinson's hand-written poems are longer or shorter than others – the length of the dashes even varied within single poems. Similar to Carney's observation of Dickinson downplaying her style of punctuation in public works, Crumbley examines the way in which these modified pieces (many of which did not include the

original number of dashes) added a singular, more organized tone to the voice in each poem. However, Crumbley argues that the use of dashes in Dickinson's poems are what allows the unconventional style of writing and voice to add a deeper meaning to her poems. Unfortunately, her unique style of grammar and punctuation weren't always taken seriously. In the opening chapter of Crumbley book, titled "Dashes and the Limits of Discourse," he states that "[up] until the late 1980s, little critical attention was paid to Dickinson's punctuation, an oversight partially resulting from a century of editors who consistently downplayed the importance of the poet's unusual manuscript" (Crumbley 14). People, editors in particular, still weren't open to her new ways of writing, and whether they liked it or not, they couldn't seem to bring themselves to take her seriously.

Many editions of Dickinson's published poetry was published according to the editors own ways of thinking. "The dashes were reduced and/or replaced by more common punctuation," and even though Thoman H. Johnson "included Dickinson's dashes, [he] failed to distinguish between ... their different lengths, angles, and positions relative to [each] line of inscription." Crumbley notes that Johnson even believed that "Dickinson's eccentricities were: 'such 'puncutuation,' ... [and] 'can be omitted in later editions'" (Crumbley 14). Even those editors that partially maintained her original structure, didn't believe it to be all that important in the long run. They never saw the full potential that Dickinson held because they were too busy trying to change her style than except or even admire it.

Emily Dickinson has been misread time and time again, as her poetry is one that stands out from that more "traditional" poetry that Emerson and Higginson were trying to guide her towards. Her work with grammar and punctuation have allowed her to not only craft poems that are quite different from her time, but also allow her to create different meanings and ways to be

read for each of her readers. Dickinson's use of variants have allowed her, not only to explore different styles, but they have also allowed her to make revisions to some of her pieces that she felt she had changed from as the years progressed.

While Dickinson's variants do indeed allow her reader's to think further and create a more in-depth analysis of some of her variant works, her variants have also allowed new ways of thinking to be processed right alongside the older, "original" ways or methods. As Dickinson reformed her ideals of life and religion, she showed the path she took through her poetry; rather than write an entirely new thought, Dickinson found a way to show her growth or new advancements in poems who's meanings appeared to be sound. In all actuality, Dickinson's poems show who she really was, and as these variants and grammatical choices are further examined, new meanings will come to life, and Dickinson's thoughts and principles will continue to make their impact on the people of modern society today.



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