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ELIZABETH PETRINO

*Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence
in Emily Dickinson*

Emily Dickinson teases the reader with literary allusions and echoes. Reading her poems and letters with sensitivity to ways that they evoke other literary works, sometimes overtly, sometimes in subtle and barely discernible ways, enables us to appreciate her ongoing dialogue with other writers and her creative reworking of their words. Similarly, deciphering her allusions demonstrates the self-confidence that allowed her to translate literary sources through her own fertile imagination. Among the many writers whom she read, she alluded to John Keats and William Shakespeare frequently, sometimes citing the same passages over the course of many years. Whereas she often quotes directly in her letters, and attributes the phrase to its author, her poems cast literary allusions subtly and anonymously. Inspired by Keats's thoughts on fame and mortality, Dickinson subtly reworked key images from his poems to engage critically with her precursor. In contrast, many of her allusions to Shakespeare, spanning her literary career, are directly attributed, allowing her to connect with literary correspondents through texts they knew well. Exploring Dickinson's allusions allows us to meditate on the process of literary transmission by which she absorbed other writers without sacrificing her distinctive style, or her range of ideas on topics like mortality and fame.

Critics have tended to focus on direct quotation, rather than images, sounds, or rhythmical patterns, in gauging literary influence on Dickinson, and perhaps for that reason, they have overlooked allusiveness in her poems that might more properly be termed *echo*. Drawing on the theory of echo developed by John Hollander, I argue that Dickinson employed allusion and echo—references

to the images, sounds, or even cadences of other literary works—to write in an innovative, generative way. Flooded by the sounds and images of these antecedent authors, Dickinson provides many rewritings—or, adapting the term coined by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*, deliberate “misreadings”—of their works in her lyrics.

Hollander offers a theory of echo that, unlike direct quotation and attributed reference, encompasses words, fragmentary phrases, and even sounds:

Poets . . . seem to echo earlier voices with full or suppressed consciousness that, and of how, they are doing so, by accident or by plan, but with the same shaping spirit that gives form to tropes of thought and feeling. Whether these figurative echoes constitute a kind of underground cipher-message for the attentive poetic ear, or perhaps a private melody or undersong hummed during composition by the poet as a spell or charm, matters less to me than that the revisionary power of allusive echo generates new figuration. (Hollander ix)

In his theory, Hollander bypasses the question of conscious design or unconscious impulse and emphasizes instead the ability of “figurative echoes” to engender new poetry through literary allusiveness. The key to studying Dickinson’s allusions lies in what they enable her to achieve, rather than in her conscious or unconscious intention. Whether the echoes were meant to be discerned by the reader or were embedded for the poet’s enjoyment alone, they give us a new way of hearing, across decades and national traditions, through the reverberation of voices other than the poet’s own. Dickinson’s echoes of Keats and Shakespeare have often gone unnoticed, perhaps because they are not easily detectable unless the precursor and later texts are closely compared. As Hollander notes, literary echoes may arise unexpectedly in a chain of textual references, since “we may observe that even some well-known and often-heard resonances are frequently reechoes, and that allusive fragments occur in chains of rebound” (Hollander 79-80). For example, Keats’s sonnet about the poet’s craft that begins with the line “To one who had been long in city pent” may ultimately echo Satan’s comments of joy that begin “As one who long in populous city pent” (Milton *PL*, Book 9, line 445), but they more precisely recall an echo of Milton’s lines in Coleridge’s “To the Nightingale,” in which he writes of “Bards in city garret pent” (line 2), thus associating Satan with the working poet (Hollander 80). As Hollander describes, Keats’s perhaps unwitting appropriation of Milton’s line (via Coleridge’s), in which his precursor’s text easily melds with his own pentameter verse, underscores the process of literary transmission and “the revisionary power of allusive echo” (ix).

Critics have given some attention to the question of the ways in which Dickinson absorbs the influences of other literary works, whether through direct quotation, indirect allusion, or echo, but they have come to no clear agreement. Paul Crumbley argues that Dickinson adapts a dialogic style that allows a number of voices to exist simultaneously and hence amplifies indeterminacy in her poems.¹ Building on critical claims about her polyvocality, Marietta Messmer posits that in her letters Dickinson habitually quotes other authors: "In her correspondences, Dickinson displays a marked preference for direct quotations over indirect allusions and other forms of visually unmarked transtextuality, thus privileging heterogeneity and dialogicity" (Messmer 143). Further, in discussing literary allusions in her poems, Vivian Pollak notes that about fifty-one poems contain direct quotation; these appear most frequently between 1858-61, decreasing until quotations become "a relatively insignificant feature of the poetry" (Pollak 60). If Messmer is correct in asserting that Dickinson's later letters no longer had the deferential tone and clear attribution of earlier ones, and Pollak that her tendency to quote directly diminished in her later work, then what happens to intertextual references?

In an initial exchange of letters with Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862, Dickinson meditated on this very question, illuminating the ways in which literary influence operated in her poems:

You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large - Because I can see
Orthography - but the Ignorance out of sight - is my Preceptor's charge - . . .
I marked a line in One Verse - because I met it after I made it - and never
consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person -
I do not let go it, because it is mine. (L271)

We might assume that in saying she "marked" a line that bore the imprint of another writer, she meant that she took notice or even struck it. Claiming that she "met" the same verse again wittily engages with texts as people, almost as if reading were a social activity. As she said famously about her "Lexicon," books served as her "companion[s]" (L261). Although she leaves to Higginson the duty to uncover the mistakes invisible to her, she describes herself as an artist who acknowledges another's work and refrains "consciously" from touching another's "paint." Pollak has observed that in this letter Dickinson "is too shrewd to claim that she never unconsciously recalls the verbal patterns or the deeper structure of other writers" (Pollak 54). Although her poems are saturated with the images and words of other literary works, her blunt conclusion not to "let [her line] go" is

equally definitive about owning the expression of her verse, once filtered through her own consciousness.

Hollander's theory of echo provides a method for recovering the deeper, allusive phrasing of Dickinson's literary echoes. She drew literary allusions from the pages of genteel journals, like the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*, in which essays, novels, and articles often excerpted poems, in a way that was typical of her generation.² Catching these fragments of sound and elusive cadences, like dimly remembered songs, as Hollander suggests, offers us as readers a way to appreciate her originality as she transforms others' writing into her own words. As she does with other writers, she recalls the lines of Shakespeare and Keats in her letters partially and through memory, since she was not beholden to accuracy. And she changes them, fitting several lines that were pentameter into her own tetrameter line. These distortions create challenges for readers seeking to recover the echoes of other writers in her poems.

Hollander's theory provides a shorthand for acknowledging the multiple kinds of meaning that can be indirectly communicated in a conscious allusion, and the way intermediary texts can act as conduits for allusion, shading and changing their meaning in the process. Consider Dickinson's allusion to Keats's *Endymion* in an 1886 letter to Louisa and Frances Norcross, one of three direct references she made to the poet by name. In it, Dickinson inquires about their lives: "Was your winter a tender shelter - perhaps like Keats's bird, 'and hops and hops in little journeys'?" (L1034). In Keats's poem, the shepherd Endymion falls in love with a goddess whom he pursues and ultimately embraces, only to fall into a dreaming sleep from which he awakes to find his vision gone. In speaking about his love for the goddess, Endymion recounts his profound despair and disconsolate wish to follow an "innocent" bird, which he deems a symbol of evil, to destruction:

If an innocent bird
Before my heedless footsteps stirr'd, and stirr'd
In little journeys, I beheld in it
A disguis'd demon, missioned to knit
My soul with under darkness; to entice
My stumblings down some monstrous precipice. (lines 698-703)

Dickinson might have gleaned the quotation from Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "The Life of Birds," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1862. Higginson quotes accurately from the original text but reframes the

description of the chewink or ground robin as an inquisitive onlooker akin to the poet:

There is one favorite bird,—the Chewink, or Ground-Robin,—which, I always fancied, must have been known to Keats when he wrote those few words of perfect descriptiveness,—

“If an innocent bird
Before my heedless footsteps *stirred and stirred*
In little journeys.”

What restless spirit is in this creature, that, while so shy in its own personal habits, it yet watches every visitor with a Paul-Pry curiosity, follows him in the woods, peers out among the underbrush, scratches upon the leaves with a pretty pretence of important business there, and presently, when disregarded, ascends some small tree and begins to carol its monotonous song, as if there were no such thing as man in the universe? (Higginson 374-75)

Reversing the speaker’s malevolence in Keats’s poem and transferring Endymion’s “restless spirit” to the bird, Higginson portrays the chewink as a shy but observant creature. Dickinson appears to have absorbed Higginson’s reinterpretation of Keats’s lines, so that it functions for her as an expression of tender shelter. She then further appropriates the original text and makes it her own; revising the original “stirr’d” as “hops” creates a more active, restless feel. Dickinson’s habit of “quoting other quotations,” especially anonymous ones, as Marietta Messmer suggests, rarely leaves them untouched, but “obscures their provenance” and fosters an “indeterminacy of author attribution,” leading to “an infinite regression of ‘origins’” (180-81). In this case, Dickinson’s decision to retain the author’s name pays homage to Keats’s artistry, but she changes the original quotation to perhaps align herself with the curious, assertive bird. As this example indicates, Dickinson absorbed and critically engaged with precursor texts without losing herself in idealizing them.

Dickinson’s references to Keats imply that she read him carefully and knew he was famous during her era as a poet who, like William Wordsworth and later Robert Frost, sought to preserve his fame for future generations. Although Dickinson mentions Keats only three times by name, she notes in a letter to Higginson her deep interest in reading him: “You inquire my Books - For Poets - I have Keats - and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose - Mr Ruskin - Sir Thomas Browne - and the Revelations” (L261). Keats’s life history as well as his poetic themes undoubtedly

sparked her interest. As the son of a prosperous stable-keeper (his friend Leigh Hunt nicknamed him "Junkets" to allude to his Cockney accent), Keats arose from the working class and became enamored of classical and romantic literature. He idealized the craft of poetry and desired to be remembered as a poet, even though savage critical attacks and his impending death from tuberculosis made the likelihood of a long-lasting fame seem remote. In a letter to Sir James Clark, excerpted in Joseph Severn's 1863 article, "The Vicissitudes of Keats's Fame," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Keats comments on how life had become a living death: "How long is this *posthumous* life of mine to last?" (Severn 403). Dickinson might have concluded that worldly fame was delusive, a view strengthened by reading about the critical attacks Keats suffered during his lifetime and his self-perceived failure as a poet. In "I died for Beauty - but was scarce" (Fr448), she recasts perhaps his most famous line from "Ode on a Grecian Urn"—"Beauty is truth, truth, beauty" (line 49)—to challenge his belief that fame can transcend death. In her lyrics inspired by his "To Autumn," including "A - Field of Stubble, lying sere" (Fr1419), "Midsummer, was it, when They died - " (Fr822), and "Fame is a fickle food" (Fr1702), she also invokes his themes of plenitude and ripeness in order to provide her own views about seasonal change and mortality.³

The way Dickinson's allusions to precursor poets engage in dialogue with other intermediary sources can be complex, and recovering these multiple layers can result in newly meaningful engagements with familiar poems. In "I died for Beauty - but was scarce," she recasts the original words spoken by the urn in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as an encounter between Keats and others of her literary precursors. Dickinson's familiarity with Keats's famous line came not only through her exposure to his poem, but also two other probable sources: Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Vision of Poets" (1844). Their allusions to this line mediate Dickinson's appropriation of Keats's verses and give different shading to the question of artistic immortality he poses. Dickinson knew Emerson's 1847 *Poems*, but she was also well read in the prose works, *Essays: First and Second Series*.⁴ In the "Idealism" section of *Nature*, she would have recognized his recasting of Keats's lines:

Whilst thus the poet animates nature with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought. . . . The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both. (Emerson 46)

Dickinson might also have read an allusion to Keats's line as it appeared in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Vision of Poets" (1846), in a eulogy of the poet published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861. Comparing these allusions to Keats with Dickinson's version underscores the way she responded to these literary precursors.

Barrett Browning's poem "A Vision of Poets" is indebted to Keats through thematic similarities and allusions to his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."⁵ The speaker of "A Vision" portrays a restless poet who cannot sleep and encounters a lady who states that her purpose on earth is to "'crown all poets to their worth'" (53, line 57).⁶ Barrett Browning also echoes Keats's "Ode" when the poet scoffs: "To their worth, lady? They are scorned / By men they sing for, till inurned" (53, lines 60-61). In response, the lady gives him an elixir that causes a vision of classical and romantic poets, among whom Keats figures. The poet recalls Keats's ode at a crucial moment when he realizes the value of his art:

The poet knew them. Faint and dim
His spirits seemed to sink in him—
Then, like a dolphin, change and swim

The current: these were poets true,
Who died for Beauty as martyrs do
For Truth—the ends being scarcely two. (61, lines 287-92)

"A Vision of Poets" provides a view of artistic immortality, but not without its painful moments: the poet's vision enables him to appreciate his place in the panoply of verse writers, though without any worldly recognition or honor.⁷

Rather than accepting Emerson's or Barrett Browning's views, Dickinson invokes Keats's line from his "Ode" to stage a dialogue in which she embraces beauty over truth and rejects notions of poetic immortality. Transposing the setting for Keats's famous line from the urn to a graveyard, Dickinson styles Keats, the "One who died for Truth," as the philosopher, while she takes on the role of the aesthete, whose ultimate religion is beauty:

I died for Beauty - but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room -

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For Beauty", I replied -

"And I - for Truth - Themselves are One -
We Bretheren, are", He said -

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night -
We talked between the Rooms -
Until the Moss had reached our lips -
And covered up - Our names -

(Fr448)

Rather than asserting artistic immortality, as Keats does, Dickinson's poem highlights the finality of the grave for the philosopher and poet.⁸ Her view of fame differs from Emerson's and Barrett Browning's views of artistic immortality: that the poet died "for" beauty implies she has died as a martyr in the cause of beauty. She dramatizes the positions taken by the poet and philosopher in Emerson's essay to highlight her disagreement with Emerson's (via Keats's) belief that the artist and philosopher's aim is abstract truth. Though the speaker and her interlocutor share an affinity, as suggested by their nearly simultaneous arrival in the tomb, their differing perspectives are implied by being separated into "adjoining Room[s]." Furthermore, we might hear her echoing and distinguishing her view of poetic fame from Barrett Browning's apotheosis of the poet who "martyrs" himself to poetry. With its religious connotations, "Bretheren" perhaps points to religious beliefs and morals incompatible with Dickinson's artistic views. Instead, however, she and Keats are "Kinsmen" who share an affinity based on their love of poetry rather than a shared national origin. "[F]ailed" implies a religious trial, but in another, secular register it connotes that they perished for lack of an audience during their lifetimes. Less martyr than aesthete, Dickinson departs from Barrett Browning's idealization of worldly sacrifice for immortal fame and Emerson's philosopher-poet in her recasting of Keats's line.

The conclusion to Dickinson's poem further engages Keats's (and, through their interpretations of his poem, Barrett Browning's and Emerson's) view that the writer might continue on through his art. Generations of critics have interpreted the last two lines of Keats's ode—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (lines 49-50)—as problematic, a phrase whose ambiguity and vagueness are difficult to penetrate. One could read these lines as supporting a triumphant view that the artist might achieve immortality through art, or, conversely, as constituting a tautology. In contrast, Dickinson's lyric uses the fiction of a posthumous voice to highlight the lack of communication that art confers. Like an epitaph, whose convention implies that the dead can speak,

the names inscribed on the tombs appear to converse as if they were speaking subjects "Until the Moss had reached our lips - / And covered up - Our names - " (Fr448). Dickinson might have pondered a connection between Keats and epitaphs, perhaps as a result of reading Joseph Severn's article, which recounts his attempt to memorialize Keats's reputation through erecting a gravestone, despite the poet's own deliberate wish to omit his name and include a famously self-effacing tribute: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" (qtd. in Severn 404). In keeping with Keats's belief that artistic reputation is only pretense, the conversation of Dickinson's figures is silenced by a lowly creeping but living "Moss." Unlike Barrett Browning, who argues that the poet achieves greatness in suffering and death, and Emerson, who contends that both artist and philosopher search for absolute knowledge, Dickinson shares with Keats a belief that the work, not the poet, is immortal.

Furthermore, reading literary works often inspired Keats, and such generative reading appears to have sparked Dickinson's imagination as well. "Recollections of Keats," written by "An Old School-Fellow" and published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1861, emphasizes two aspects of his personality and life that would have resonated with her: his reading habits and his competitive nature as a poet. To make up for his limited formal schooling, Keats worked hard as a student and read widely in Greek and Roman literature, mythology, epic poetry, and British classics, including Shakespeare. Though deeply influenced by his contemporaries, Keats's reading of Shakespeare stimulated his own poetic work to such an extent that he wrote his sonnet "Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art" on a blank page facing "A Lover's Complaint" in his copy of Shakespeare's poems (Keats 372). Penning his poem side by side with Shakespeare's suggests that Keats's reading of the poems constituted a generative act—as he reads, he becomes inspired to write. Moreover, he devised occasional verse pieces overtly referring to the act of reading, such as "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again" and "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," even composing poems in a friendly rivalry with his friends. In one anecdote recounted in the essay, a timed contest between Keats and his friend and fellow poet Leigh Hunt resulted in the sonnet "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket," a story that might have stimulated Dickinson to engage in her own emulation of Keats in writing "Further in Summer than the Birds - " (Fr895).

A passage at the end of "Recollections of Keats" speculates about the effect of his immersion in Shakespeare's works through a marginal note Keats made in his copy of the plays in a way that might have resonated with Dickinson:

A marginal note by him in a folio copy of the Plays is an example of the complete absorption his mind had undergone during the process of his matriculation. . . .

The note that Keats made was this:—"The genius of Shakespeare was an *innate universality*; wherefore he laid the achievements of human intellect prostrate beneath his indolent and kingly gaze: *he could do easily men's utmost*; his plan of tasks to come was not of this world. If what he proposed to do hereafter would not in the idea answer the aim, how tremendous must have been his conception of ultimates! ("Recollections" 100)

Keats idealizes Shakespeare for his "innate universality," and he stresses his high ambition to reach beyond the mundane goals of other, more average poets. By idealizing Shakespeare for his lofty goals, his "conception of ultimates," Keats also concedes that his own objectives may fall short and not reach their "aim"—a typical concern for Keats, who meditated at length on poetic fame. Dickinson's speculation about the extent to which literary works appear in her writing might have been stimulated by this article, enough that she may have recalled the word "absorption" when she spoke to Higginson about literary influence a year later. "Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?" she wonders (qtd. in Higginson's letter to his wife describing Dickinson [L342b]). Far from forgetfulness, "absorption" implies that she so fully imbibed another poetic source that its words became a vehicle for her own wisdom. Dickinson may have seen herself in a lively but respectful competition with Keats, a stance she perhaps modeled on his own drafting of impromptu poems after rereading his favorite authors, and that centers for her around his "To Autumn."

Keats's "To Autumn" portrays fall as a season of plenitude, but one in which mortality undercuts the celebration of ripeness:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

* * *

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (Keats 218-19)

The ode depicts harvested fields awaiting the coming winter, and the last stanza contrasts the fall's plenitude and warmth with the coming of winter and, by extension, death. Stanley Plumley comments that the poem eerily omits the presence of the author, so fully does it represent the autumnal scene without him: "'To Autumn' is a tone poem for sure, a twilight symbolist masterpiece realized independently . . . of its implied author, as if it were an object, self-created, within the harvest terms itself" (171). It evokes meditation on death particularly in the last stanza: the "soft-dying day" is accompanied by the sound of "small gnats" mourning in a "wailful choir," while the "full-grown lambs" will be slaughtered in the fall.

Dickinson mines the imagery of "To Autumn" in several poems to underscore the delusive promises of the season. For example, in "A - Field of Stubble, lying sere" she subtly chides New Englanders for observing but not fully understanding the landscape's significance. We witness but do not fully "see," as perhaps Keats did, the implications of the season, as the pun in the opening line implies:

A - Field of Stubble, lying sere
Beneath the second Sun -
It's Toils to Brindled People thrust -
It's Triumphs - to the Bin -
Accosted by a timid Bird
Irresolute of Alms -
Is often seen - but seldom felt,
On our New England Farms -
(Fr1419)

Described as "sere," the dry and withered fields lie beneath a "second Sun," a possible allusion to Indian summer, suggesting a change from summer to autumn that might promote an inner vision, a second sight. Adam Sweeting contends that this poem recalls "a typical New England postharvest poem, a work that like

Longfellow's 'Aftermath' presents an agricultural scene after the reaping of fall grains" (128). Dickinson may acknowledge Keats's achievement in "To Autumn" by chiding her countrymen for their short-sighted view of the changing seasons, overlooking autumn's darker, more somber side. Other features of the poem hint that the scene is "seen" but not "felt," that human beings are indifferent to animals and creatures in the face of the maturing fields. Describing farmers with their animals in the fading light as "Brindled People," a term meaning a tawny or gray color with streaks of darker hue, she notes that the work of the harvest is "thrust" upon them; the adjectives and verb imply that they lack consciousness or choice about their lives, much like the gnats—or, by extension, us—in Keats's poem, who are driven along by the wind, "borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." The alliterative *s*'s and *t*'s in "Stubble," "sere," "Sun," "Toils," and "Triumphs," add cohesion in a similar way to Keats's poem, which achieves through rhyme and echo its aural effects, as in "sun," "swell," "still," "cease," "summer," and "cell." Whereas Keats describes the swallows gathering in the skies, perhaps in preparation for traveling to a warmer climate, Dickinson uses the word "Accosted" to describe the appeal of a single "timid" bird, who feels "Irresolute" about accepting the "Alms" offered by the field. Another draft, written about 1877, contains variants that further resonate with Keats's poem: "It's corn - to Brindled People thrust - / It's Pumpkin to - the Bin - " (Fr1419A) emphasizes the connection with Keats's lines "To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells / With a sweet kernel . . ." (lines 7-8).⁹ The field offers its bounty to nature's creatures and human beings, though we seem much less aware than animals of the season's implications. In light of the last line, one wonders if "sere" ironically suggests that although we should be "seers," we are only casual observers of the land, unlike Keats's British counterparts and perhaps the poet herself.

Dickinson imaginatively reworks key images of Keats regarding the central theme of a fullness that presages death in "Midsummer, was it, when They died - ":

Midsummer, was it, when They died -
A full, and perfect time -
The Summer closed upon itself
In Consummated Bloom -

The Corn, her furthest Kernel filled
Before the coming Flail -

When These - leaned into Perfectness -
Through Haze of Burial -

(Fr822)

Here, the reference to fullness echoes the “mellow fruitfulness” and “maturing sun” to which Keats refers, but Dickinson alters the natural progression of death by shifting the time from autumn to midsummer. She might have had in mind the deaths of particular people, since in the fascicle version of this poem she offers “These Two” for “These” (Fr822B, line 7), but the opening lines suggest another intertextual possibility. The antecedent for “They” might lie in Keats’s poem—“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?” If the springtime promises have departed at midsummer, then “Consummated Bloom” perhaps refers to the fulfillment of Keats’s image of bees pollinating “later flowers . . . / Until they think warm days will never cease, / For Summer has o’er-brimmed their clammy cells” (“To Autumn,” lines 9-11). At the same time, Dickinson’s sexual pun on “Consummated” implies that the season has come to a close at its zenith, rather than in its waning, a view consistent with Keats’s poem. Harkening back to lines such as “plump the hazel shells / With a sweet kernel” (lines 7-8), Dickinson echoes Keats’s imagery of ripe corn as a symbol of the season. In contrast to Keats’s vision that time and the “maturing sun” have conspired to bring them to maturity, however, “The Corn, her furthest Kernel filled / Before the coming Flail - ” stresses the corn’s self-sufficiency, rather than its dependence on the sun. The promises of spring have also reached their culmination in midsummer, as the “Corn” and “Kernel” “leaned into Perfectness - / Through Haze of Burial - .” Perhaps referring to “mists” of humid air that appear at the beginning of Keats’s poem, or to the farmers’ habit of burning piles of chaff to clear the fields, “Haze” obscures rather than offers a clear vision of the season’s end. In moving the season from autumn to midsummer, Dickinson condenses the seasonal cycle to heighten the sense of mortality underpinning human life.

Similarly, “Fame is a fickle food,” left undated at Dickinson’s death, recalls the imagery of “To Autumn,” but it also acerbically comments on the promise of achieving poetic fame that was so important to Keats:

Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate
Whose table once a
Guest but not
The second time is set

Whose crumbs the crows inspect
And with ironic caw
Flap past it to the
Farmer's corn
Men eat of it and die

(Fr1702)

Recalling Keats's seasons that "plump the hazel shells / With a sweet kernel," Dickinson transforms his "treble-soft" of the robin and "twitter" of the swallows into the harsh, grating sound of the crow. In place of Keats's intricate eleven-line stanzas with interlocking rhymes, Dickinson substitutes a three- and four-beat tetrameter line with no discernible rhyme scheme except the couplet that joins the two halves of the poem ("set" / "inspect"). This rhyme links the poem's meditation on fame with nature's ability to see through its deceptions. Fame is a "fickle food / Upon a shifting plate," whose crumbs the crows "inspect" only momentarily, until they turn to the fields of corn and fly away with "ironic caw." Writing in 1885 to Forrest Emerson, a minister who was familiar with the family, she alludes to Keats again in the context of death and poetic fame. Shortly after friend and fellow poet Helen Hunt Jackson's death, she asked Emerson to share information from an acquaintance who knew her: "Should she know any circumstances of her life's close, would she perhaps lend it to you, that you might lend it to me? Oh had that Keats a Severn!" (L1018). Her comment searches for meaning about death through a first-hand witness account of Jackson's final moments; it acknowledges also that such reminiscences are mediated by individuals, as they were for Keats, individuals who participate in constructing a reputation for the poet. In fact, her request that Emerson "lend" her information from his friend points to the chain of remembrance through which she hoped she might gain some knowledge. Fame alone does not confer immortality; rather, those left behind, including biographers and critics, memorialize their subjects. Even though she requests news of her friend's last moments, she acknowledges that posthumous fame is subject to interpretation at the hands of others and predicated on mortality, as the last line of her poem bluntly states: "Men eat of [fame] and die."

Dickinson found Keats's themes of artistic immortality and death to be stimulating, an opportunity to puzzle through her own position on poetic fame in her multiple strong misreadings of his poems. Shakespeare, too, lends security to Dickinson in the face of the inevitable change of time and symbolizes the possibilities for immortality through art. "While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm -" (L368), she notes again to Higginson in 1871. Dickinson frequently quotes

from or alludes to Shakespeare; indeed, Jack Capps goes so far as to claim that “Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible are sufficient to establish the prose and poetry of Renaissance England as the most important body of literature in Emily Dickinson’s reading” (Capps 60). Most critics have discussed *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* as key texts that allowed Dickinson to express her views of dramatic presence, but they have neglected *Macbeth*, despite her frequent allusions to it in her letters.¹⁰ Nevertheless, *Macbeth* outnumbered every other play in references and provides a rich source, particularly for her meditation on rereading as a means to enhance the deliberate, conscious adaptation of literature.¹¹

Critics have perhaps overlooked generative references to Shakespeare that persist throughout her career. As Vivian Pollak notes, Dickinson uses literary allusions in her letters to speak to her correspondents about experiences they shared; in her poems, she uses fewer overt allusions, frequently at most naming Shakespearean characters (Pollak 54-55). In *Emily Dickinson’s Shakespeare*, Páraic Finnerty asserts that “her recorded public engagement with Shakespeare, and much of her praise of him, comes after her eye trouble in the mid-1860s” and notes that “she largely excluded reference to Shakespeare [in her poems] . . . to the extent that critics find her indebtedness to him insignificant or irrecoverable” (Finnerty 132). Alfred Habegger also contends that, prior to 1864, the scarcity of allusions to Shakespeare derived from her lack of maturity: “Dickinson would not be ready for Shakespeare till the mid-1860s, when she found the treatment of passion in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello* of compelling interest. Prior to that, there is little or no evidence of enthusiasm” (255). In contrast to the view that Dickinson made few allusions to Shakespeare before 1860, Richard B. Sewall argues: “She began referring to Shakespeare in her letters, or quoting him, when she was fourteen, and never stopped. Although all but a very few quotations come after the trouble with her eyes, she may have been quoting the plays steadily in letters that are lost” (701). Responding to claims that Shakespearean allusions appear rarely, if at all, in her poems, Marianne Noble argues that “critics may deem the allusions to Shakespeare in Dickinson’s poetry ‘irrecoverable’ or simply not there at all because Dickinson does not allude directly, as she does in letters. Instead, she appears to be moved by Shakespeare and inspired to create inventions in reaction to his, grounded in the language of his ideas” (5). Dickinson’s adaptations of Shakespeare are obscured in her poems partly because she creates “inventions” of her own, as Noble suggests.¹²

There is ample evidence to suggest that Dickinson read and enjoyed Shakespeare in literary circles earlier than 1864 and returned to reading Shakespeare with a

renewed interest after her vision improved. We know that as a youth she frequented a reading club, a gathering of young men and women that included the poet and her sister, a group that Lavinia recorded in her diary as attending eleven times from March to July 1851 (Habegger 254); her cousin Emily Fowler spent an entire morning at the Dickinson house “reading Shakespeare” (Leyda 1: 202). Dickinson’s fidelity to Shakespeare seems clear in an anecdote regarding her refusal to read an expurgated version of the plays, as proposed by some young men in the group: “I remember the lofty air with which Emily took her departure, saying, ‘There’s nothing wicked in Shakespeare and if there is I don’t want to know it’” (Leyda 1: 478). It was around this time, too, that Susan Dickinson acquired a copy of the complete Shakespeare in 1853 (Leyda 1: 249), one of at least two complete editions in the households. An advertisement appearing in the *Hampshire and Franklin Express* in 1852 for a performance of Shakespearean soliloquies by Miss Lizzie Johnson, an elocutionist, suggests that Dickinson was exposed to public readings typical of nineteenth-century entertainment (Leyda 1: 250). Such events point to Shakespeare’s persistent importance for her within a community of readers from her teenage years.

In attempting to bridge the distance between correspondents, Dickinson refers to *Macbeth* twice in letters from 1845 and 1850 to Abiah Root, even before she began reading Shakespeare in company with others. In the second letter, she jokingly styles herself a “Weird Sister” and signified on the opening speech by the witches in *Macbeth*, a famous line and the only tetrameter verse in the play: “If you were here I would tell you something - several somethings which have happened since you went away, but time, and space, as usual, oppose themselves, and I put my treasures away till ‘we two meet again’” (L31). Dickinson presumes that Abiah is familiar enough with this play that she could make shorthand reference to it. Placed in the context of her letter, the reference also implies that literature has the power to dissolve time and space, an idea that recurs in later references to *Macbeth* and highlights its supernatural themes. Indeed, the conclusion to the first half of Dickinson’s letter contains several allusions about death and mourning to Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and Charles Dickens’s *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*. In encouraging Abiah to keep her memory alive, Dickinson resorts to their shared memories of these works: “If you are thinking soon to go away, and to show your face no more, just inform me - will you - I would have the ‘long lingering look’ which you cast behind - It would be an invaluable addition to my treasures, and ‘keep your memory green’” (L31). Not coincidentally, this passage reflects not only the high fidelity to the original source typical of her

adolescent quotations but also, in dancing around the topic of death, implies that a shared set of literary texts might help lessen the threat of mortality. Though the friends may not be present to each other, their shared understanding of literature relieves Dickinson's anxiety about their separation and temporarily subdues the specter of old age and death.

Dickinson contains the threat of mortality by invoking a shared reference to *Macbeth* among her correspondents. In a letter sent to Susan Dickinson in 1852, she identifies with Macbeth's comment that he is tragically fated, when upon hearing that the English forces have approached his castle, he laments: "My way of life / Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf, / And that which should accompany old age / . . . / I must not look to have" (*Mac.* 5.3.22-26). Jokingly quoting her sister (or substituting a close version of Shakespeare's words for her sentiment), Dickinson comically laments aging, then rescinds her fear of growing older: "Vinnie expresses her sympathy at my 'sere and yellow leaf' and resumes her work, dear Susie, tell me how *you* feel - ar'nt there days in one's life when to be old dont seem a thing so sad -" (L73). Shortly after the visit of her friend Higginson in September 1870, Dickinson refers again to *Macbeth* to remind him of his promise to visit again: "After you went I took Macbeth and turned to 'Birnam Wood.' Came twice 'to Dunsinane' - I thought and went about my work" (L352). Convinced by the witches' predictions despite evidence of his impending fate, Macbeth refuses to retreat in the face of reports that the English army approaches: "Bring me no more reports. Let them fly all! / Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane, / I cannot taint with fear" (5.3.1-3). In rereading a favorite passage, Dickinson intriguingly selects a scene that fulfills the prediction of the witches that Macbeth would be defeated when "Birnam Wood" comes to "Dunsinane." More than likely, she meant to hint to Higginson that he should also visit her again. But his long expected visit might have suggested to her the supernatural theme of Shakespeare's play. Much as rereading afforded her the opportunity to experience the pleasure of the text again, she could view Higginson's recent visit—and his future one—through the lens of the play as a miraculous event, which she terms "Unreal," that might eventually come to pass again.

Over time she grew less and less confident that literature could redress the pain brought on by her friends' absences, especially in the face of her own physical limitations, but she continued to believe literature might bridge the gap between their presence and absence. Writing to Elizabeth Holland in 1885, she regrets the rheumatism afflicting her and refers to the letter she expects from her friend:

Were Revenge accessible, I would surely wreak it, but that, like all the rest
of us, is an Apparition -

I trust he will discontinue you for something more befitting - I shall then seek the "Letter" which the "Weird Woman promised" me - (L966)

Echoing *Macbeth's* themes of revenge and guilt, Dickinson alludes to Banquo's realization that Macbeth had achieved his goal: "Thou hast it now — King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women promised" (3.1.1-2). In asking her friend to write to her, she also styles herself as Lady Macbeth, who receives a letter advising her of her husband's plans. Dickinson's appreciation for *Macbeth* may have been heightened by a series of lectures on Shakespeare delivered at the College Chapel in 1850 by Richard Henry Dana, including a discussion of supernatural elements in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* (Finnerty 36). Dana asserts that both heroes exhibit "the strong workings of the imagination," but he redeems Macbeth, whose imagination elevates him into "more than man" and frees him from "laws of earth and of his fellow-creatures," as a doomed, regretful man (qtd. in Finnerty 36-37). If Macbeth represents an artist-hero who contemplates greatness through the imagination, a figure with whom Dickinson may have identified, Lady Macbeth, I propose, symbolizes the repressed workings of the unconscious mind, with which the poet must constantly be in dialogue. Macbeth's desire to cure his wife's emotional impulses parallels the universal need to turn inward to overcome grief. Through sharing this allusion with others, Dickinson implies that healing is self-conferred but also that sharing one's sentiments with others through literature might alleviate pain.

Dickinson's meditation on a key passage from *Macbeth's* discussion of Lady Macbeth's illness, to which she returned several times over the space of many years, emphasizes the powers of imagination that she identified with Lady Macbeth and Shakespeare's timelessness. On three separate occasions, Dickinson refers in her letters to Macbeth and the physician's conversation about Lady Macbeth, who suffers from sleepwalking brought on by the guilt she feels as a result of arranging Duncan's death. In the original text, the physician explains to the desperate Macbeth that she suffers from a diseased mind that cannot be treated externally:

DOCTOR. Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.

MACBETH. Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain

And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

DOCTOR. Therein the patient
Must minister to himself. (5.3.38-46)

In an 1869 letter to her cousin Perez Cowan, who had been recently ordained, Dickinson refers to this conversation as she expresses sympathy over her cousin's anguish about his sister's health, and perhaps also to his sleeplessness and thoughts of death:

It grieves me that you speak of Death with so much expectation. . . .
I suppose we are all thinking of Immortality, at times so stimulatedly that we cannot sleep. Secrets are interesting, but they are also solemn - and speculate with all our might, we cannot ascertain.
I trust as Days go on your sister is more Peace than Pang. . . .
We bruise each other less in talking than in writing, for then a quiet accent helps words themselves too hard.
Do you remember Peter, what the Physician said to Macbeth? "That sort must heal itself."
I am glad you are working. Others are anodyne. (L332)

Dickinson incorporates Shakespeare's theme of inner strength and resilience in confronting psychological pain within her own metrical framework: "That sort must heal itself" transforms Shakespeare's two lines with their initial trochee and iambic lines into a three-beat iambic line. Moreover, substituting "heal" for "minister" and the impersonal phrase "that sort" for the "patient," she transfers the act of becoming well psychologically to the individual, rather than the professional. "[A]nodyne" in the sentence that follows her paraphrasing comes close to Macbeth's desire for "some sweet oblivious antidote" to relieve his wife's suffering. Dickinson asserts that Cowan's pain will be alleviated through work, and her rewriting of Shakespeare implies that the company of others will soften his pain.¹³

Dickinson's allusion to this passage changes and deepens over the course of years, as her reliance on connecting with others becomes more imperative. In a letter to Louisa and Frances Norcross from around 1880, she interrogates the limits of friendship to provide solace for loneliness and grief:

I forget no part of that sweet, smarting visit, nor even the nettle that stung my rose.

When Macbeth asked the physician what could be done for his wife, he made the mighty answer, "That sort must heal itself;" but, sister, that was guilt, and love, you know, is God, who certainly "gave the love to reward the love," even were there no Browning. (L669)

As she does in the previous letter, but with greater urgency implied by the word "mighty," Dickinson evokes Lady Macbeth's illness to convey the feeling of loss. In recasting Shakespeare's lines, she stresses that her pain springs from love, rather than guilt, and recalls Robert Browning's line from "Evelyn Hope": "God above / Is great to grant, as mighty to make, / And creates the love to reward the love" (qtd. in Johnson 678). Although truth may exist independent of its expression in language, literature has the power to encourage us to rely on inner resources, a thought from which Dickinson derives consolation and offers it to others. In May 1885, she employed the same misquoted phrase for the last time that we know of as she extended her sympathy to Thomas Gilbert, her sister-in-law Susan's brother, after their brother's death: "How hallowedly Macbeth said 'that sort must heal itself,' yet a grieved whisper from a friend might instruct it how - " (L986). Ascribing the words to Macbeth for the first time, rather than the physician, she seeks to console her correspondent with wisdom gleaned from the play. In explaining this misappropriation, Thomas H. Johnson implies that she has forgotten its actual speaker, since "the quotation attempts to recall the lines of the physician" (874). Given her frequent reference to these lines, however, another possibility might be that she consciously ascribes a higher self-awareness to Macbeth, brought about through his suffering and tragic fate. Her emphasis on the tone and inflection of the words, as suggested by "hallowedly" and "grieved whisper," point to her willingness to reach out to others in healing internal wounds through literature.

Rather than restrict our understanding of literary influence to overt allusion and direct quotation, I have offered readings of several poems and letters and their sources to explore how Hollander's theory of echo might extend the range and type of allusions we currently see in her poetry. Absorbing and recasting her literary sources, Dickinson actively produced a creative reworking of her predecessors' views and wrestled with questions of literary fame. Dickinson shared Keats's elevation of the work of art over any presumed immortality for the writer, and she also found in the wit and depth of Shakespeare a model of poetic fame that exists in collaboration with readers who were intimately familiar with his plays. Sharing these penetrating allusions in her letters allowed her to reach out to her correspondents and, simultaneously, to acknowledge the importance of a fellow artist. Through direct quotation, allusion, echo, and metrical compression,

Dickinson's poems and letters demonstrate the artistic achievement by which two of the poets she most cherished could speak through her without completely subsuming her. To quote another poem, Dickinson's habits of reading and writing underscore the ways in which each of these writers became a "Voice that stands for Floods to me" (Fr1207), a fertile source that warrants further exploration of her generative use of literary influence.

Notes

Special thanks to Daniel Manheim and Marianne Noble as well as to several colleagues at Fairfield University—Robert Epstein, Angela Harkins, Danke Li, and Giovanni Ruffini—for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. While Paul Crumbley does not discuss allusion, he demonstrates the indeterminacy engendered in reading her poems due to their many possible intertextual references. For example, in his first chapter, he situates Dickinson against the discourses prominent in her literary culture—gothic, romantic, sentimental, and evangelical literature.
2. Recently, Mary Loeffelholz has contended that poetry was circulated widely and anthologized through embedded texts, such as novels containing verse. In addition, Dickinson drew a source related to her poem in response to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" directly from a eulogy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in September of 1861. See Capps (83).
3. Among the poems that contain echoes of Keats's "To Autumn" are "There is a June when Corn is cut" (Fr811), "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (Fr344), "I'm sorry for the Dead - Today -" (Fr582), and "I suppose the time will come" (Fr1389). These lyrics contain image patterns, especially corn and apples, which hearken back to Keats's ode.
4. See Capps: "She was only nineteen when she received this parting gift [of Emerson's *Poems*] from Newton, and there is every indication that the early impressions made by Emerson's poetry were lasting ones which she renewed in her reading and which reappear frequently in her writing" (113).
5. In her epigraph, Barrett Browning employs schematic echo, known best in Ovid's portrayal of Echo and Narcissus from *The Metamorphoses*, in which "questions are asked of, or propositions addressed to, Echo, in successive lines of verse; either she completes the line by echoing the last syllable or two, or her response makes up a separate, short line" (Hollander 26). Echo's responses to the speaker's questions about poetic fame—"Power," "In Heaven aye," "By paine," and "Go on"—highlight the means by which—and at what cost—Barrett Browning's poet would achieve immortality. The device points to the importance of echo and literary influence in Barrett Browning's poem.
6. The poet's encounter with the lady parallels Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in several ways: first, the poet meets "a lady riding slow / Upon a palfrey white as snow" (Barrett Browning 52, lines 34-35), resembling the spiritual "dame"; second, she asks him to drink, an echo of the passage in Keats in which the beautiful lady offers her knight a drink; third, he turns pale and deathlike, reminiscent of the "palely loitering" knight (line 46).
7. In *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, Capps acknowledges the importance of Keats to "I died for Beauty" (Fr448), but he contends that Dickinson was more indebted to Barrett Browning for her "images of brotherhood and martyrdom," since neither term appears in Keats's poem (83). About Emerson, he concludes that Dickinson "was conscious of her fondness for Emerson's writings and of her frequent use of Emerson's quotations in her letters, yet she seems to have been unaware of the way in which the poetic materials

- that she gleaned from him reappeared in her own verse" (118). There is no reason to assume, however, that she was unconscious of Emerson's (or Barrett Browning's) influence in her poems, since she praised Emerson's writing and wrote poems in honor of Barrett Browning.
8. Joanne Feit Diehl provides an informed reading of Dickinson's view of Keats's romantic vision, including his view of artistic immortality. According to Diehl, "[h]ere Dickinson reveals her image of a mythic Keats—one who had met with misunderstanding and incurred the ire of critics, one who died before his poetic promise could be fully realized" (121). Whereas Keats insists upon integrity between beauty and truth in art, exalting the limitations of human life, Dickinson refuses to accept such a resolution and continues to interrogate the inner division she perceives in our existence. For Diehl's discussion of "I died for Beauty - but was scarce" (Fr448), see 120-21. Regarding Dickinson's adaptation of Keats's imagery, such as bees, flowers, the butterfly and chrysalis, and wine, see Diehl (96-121).
 9. The possible timing of this manuscript may suggest that Dickinson recalled an earlier conversation she had with Higginson about literary influence. Dickinson sent the first version to her nephew, Ned Dickinson, during his illness in March 1877; her second draft version, from which these variants come, is inscribed on the reverse side of a sheet of paper containing a draft of "Of their peculiar light" (Fr1396A) and a canceled note to Higginson, written about 1876, inquiring whether he might be planning to visit Amherst and perhaps recalling their earlier conversation.
 10. Among recent commentators who offer outstanding readings of Dickinson's relationship to Shakespeare, see Paula Bennett, Judith Farr, Paraic Finnerty, and Marianne Noble. For a recent discussion of Dickinson's allusive reworking of Emily Brontë, see Alexandra Socarides.
 11. According to Jack L. Capps, Dickinson refers to *Macbeth* more frequently than all other Shakespeare plays: *Macbeth*, 14; *Othello*, 11; *Hamlet*, 10; *Anthony and Cleopatra*, 7.
 12. Eleanor Heginbotham also offers an insightful reading of the influence of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and contends that Dickinson employs a creative reworking of the source material.
 13. Polly Longworth contends that Dickinson's verses and letters often perform "healing work" through which she consoled her friends and relatives who were suffering. Unsatisfied by traditional religious consolation, however, in later years "Dickinson's letters grew more poignant even as they grew more abstract" (5). I would add that such letters referring to *Macbeth* also display her belief that intellectual work might foster psychological healing and simultaneously quell unconscious influences symbolized by Lady Macbeth.

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The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

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