"[A] curious creature"?: Dickinson and/in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT: The *Apple TV+* series *Dickinson* culminates decades of feminist and queer scholarship on the poet Emily Dickinson, positioning her as a queer icon while challenging conventional portrayals of her life and legacy. Through the lens of feminist and queer studies, this paper examines the series' portrayal of Dickinson's journey to poetic self-identification, her resistance to patriarchal constraints, and her impact on contemporary culture. I argue that the series constructs a narrative that merges notions of the biopic with a coming-of-age story as well as historical facts with millennial sensibilities, resulting in a very effective re-writing of Dickinson's life based on feminist scholarship. I claim that *Dickinson* not only redefines the poet's public image but also overcomes restrictions of the biopic genre and thus becomes part of a feminist (and queer) counter-public sphere that resonates with contemporary audiences.

KEYWORDS: Emily Dickinson; Popular Culture; Film Studies; Queer Studies; Feminist Counter-Public Sphere

Dickinson as a Curious Creature

In his 2019 review of the Apple TV+ series *Dickinson*, Troy Patterson describes the show as "a curious creature! Its existence a perplexity! Absurd but sincere, pop but abstruse, 'Dickinson' pulses with tender attention to the tropes of teen soaps." Patterson accurately highlights some of the show's most important tropes, employed by director Alena Smith to include findings from feminist and queer scholarship on the nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson. However, the "abstruse" and "pop" display of the poet is not necessarily "curious" to Dickinson scholars, but deeply resonant: The radical reimagining of Dickinson's life and art culminates decades of feminist scholarship. Scholars have long contested the image of the poet as an eccentric madwoman in the attic, yet this reinterpretation must still convince the broader public sphere.[1] *Dickinson* decisively rewrites the narrative of the reclusive poet in public discourse by portraying a strong woman defined by her own will, agency, and her ability to write brilliant poetry.

The series traces the life of the young protagonist Emily, beginning just before her brother Austin's engagement to her friend Sue in 1853.[2] It concludes sometime between the birth of

[1] For a detailed study on re-framing Dickinson's legacy and the trope of the "madwoman" see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

[2] I will refer to the character of Emily Dickinson in the series as Emily to avoid confusion with the historical figure Emily Dickinson.

Emily's nephew, Edward, in 1861 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. The series covers Emily's formative years, following her from the age of twenty-two until her early thirties, and combines historical facts with a creative reimagining of her life, often based on interpretations of Dickinson's poems. The series not only reframes Dickinson in relation to her contemporaries but also establishes a redefined narrative for future generations. Although the historical accuracy of the series is certainly debatable, its cultural impact is undeniable and Dickinson scholar Páraic Finnerty rightfully observes that *Dickinson*, along with other recent portrayals of the poet, "ensure[s] that the poet [...] has never been more fully embedded in popular culture or more 'talked about' beyond the confines of academia and the cultural heritage industry" (1-2). Throughout this paper, I explore key aspects of *Dickinson* across all three seasons, highlighting how the series' popular reimagining of Emily Dickinson's life functions as a cross-over between a coming-of-age story and a biopic that invites viewers to engage with the ambiguities and uncertainties that still surround Dickinson's biography and legacy. The series transcends the centuries by effectively combining biographic storytelling with contemporary feminist attitudes, distinctly millennial coming-of-age sensibilities—such as contemporary language and phrases, pop, and electronic music—as well as struggles and experiences of contemporary young adults, such as house parties or first loves.

In this paper, I argue that *Dickinson* creates a counter-public sphere that attends to feminist and queer perspectives (cf. Felski 9, Berlant and Warner 558-59). The series creates a discursive space that challenges dominant cultural norms, making room for alternative identities and perspectives to emerge and be disseminated into the public sphere. Expanding on Felski's definition, the boldness and "queerness" with which director Alena Smith approaches the biography of Dickinson allows the series to create a space both within a feminist and a queer counter-public, in which dominant (heteronormative) discourses are actively challenged (Berlant and Warner 558-59). The series draws on decades of feminist and queer criticism to present a more complex and accurate representation of the poet to a contemporary public and thereby mediates between literary scholarship, Dickinson's texts and popular misconceptions about the poet.[3] Yet *Dickinson* not only engages with feminist readings of Emily Dickinson but also reimagines her sexuality and thereby disrupts heteronormative biographical narratives. In doing so, the series repositions Dickinson as a proto-feminist and a courageous, confident, and queer female writer. Rather than repeating the image of Dickinson as an isolated madwoman and spinster in the attic, the series creates a protagonist—and poet—with agency, challenging dominant cultural and historical

[3] Felski argues that "[a] feminist textual theory cannot simply move from text to world; it must be able to account for the levels of *mediation* between literary and social domains, in particular the diverse and often contradictory ideological and cultural forces which shape processes of literary production and reception" (8). *Dickinson* does that by incorporating millennial sensibilities and allowing the nineteenth century to transcend into the present.

narratives and opening a space for an alternative feminist and queer cultural imagination within a nineteenth-century setting.

In what follows, I will explore how the series transgresses the genre of the biopic by combining it with a coming-of-age story, ultimately empowering the poet by portraying her as an active and independent woman. Further, I aim to illustrate how the show promotes a feminist reading of Dickinson as a queer, brilliant, and dedicated poet. The series employs several recurring themes—fact and fiction, coming-of-age, gender roles, sexuality, and Dickinson's identity as a poet—that, in tandem, create a reimagination of Dickinson. I show how the series offers a compelling revision of Emily Dickinson's legacy, contributing to a multifaceted understanding of her life and work, while challenging the genre of the (female) biopic and creating a deeply resonating narrative both in terms of form and content.

Dickinson: Coming-of-Age Story meets Semi-Fictional Feminist Biopic

While *Dickinson* can be categorized as a biopic, it challenges the prevailing image of Dickinson as a reclusive, isolated poet by transgressing the boundaries of its genre and creating space for a counter-narrative within a feminist and queer counter-public sphere. In what follows, I will briefly outline the principles of feminist film studies before analyzing how the series subverts common tropes of the biopic and employs a coming-of-age story to allow *Dickinson* to formally and conceptually break free from conventional portrayals of the poet.

Dickinson merges a coming-of-age story with a biopic by positioning Emily's transformation into a poet as a "formative experience"—a central characteristic of any coming-of-age story (cf. Millard 4). While the series challenges the boundaries of genre and thereby conceptually rebels against existing structures, it also takes its liberties with Dickinson's formative years and thus intricately blurs the line between fact and fiction. *Dickinson* creates the illusion of being deeply rooted in historical reality by beginning each season with visual references to historical artifacts, such as Dickinson's manuscripts, portraits, or the Dickinson homestead. Season two, for example, opens with the words: "The records of Emily Dickinson's life up to and including Sue and Austin's marriage are full and factual, compared with what lies ahead. Over the next few years, just a handful of letters survive. The truth, perhaps, is hidden in her poems" (2, 1, 00:55-1:16). This framing summarizes the series' approach to the life of Emily Dickinson: It draws on known historical facts but fills in the gaps with fictionalized elements, particularly inspired by Dickinson's letters and poetry, to create a relatable portrayal of her as a young woman with an active imagination. Moreover, instead of using her poems solely as biographical clues, *Dickinson* consistently draws specifically on feminist readings of her poetry to create the strong-minded and independent persona of Emily Dickinson on screen. Stephanie Russo convincingly calls this blurring of fact and fiction, past and present, "anachronis[tic]" (164), noting that the series "positively revels in the use of creative anachronism, consistently juxtaposing past and present" (172) to emphasize that the past still deeply resonates with our contemporary world (164). I argue that this juxtaposition also

allows the series to criticize how patriarchal norms, both of Dickinson's time and in posthumous framings, branded her as "eccentric" or "mad" for defying social expectations. By incorporating modern language and music into the series, *Dickinson* enables its viewers to empathize with the characters and to understand how gendered double-standards persist across centuries. As such, Emily's refusal to marry is no longer a surprising or weird biographical fact but is reframed as a feminist decision that challenges the constraints for women during the nineteenth century. In doing so the series uses anachronisms not just as a stylistic choice, but as a critical tool to highlight, resist and rewrite the enduring legacy of Dickinson and the patriarchal narratives surrounding it.

A central goal of feminist film studies is to portray women and their lives as they truly are, rather than adhering to traditional narratives (Hollinger 8). Karen Hollinger describes biopics about female artists as "a hybrid cinematic form that tells the partly factual, partly fictional story of a real person's life, or a significant portion of that life. It combines elements of melodrama, history, psychological drama, biography, and documentary" (158). While traditionally more focused on men than on women, biopics aim to reveal essential truths about a person, typically centering on work, achievements, ambitions, and romantic relationships (Bingham 10-11). *Dickinson* is, of course, not a film but a series, yet, for the purposes of this article, the concept of the biopic will be adapted to the series, keeping in mind that series allow for broader, serial narration (Ernst and Paul 14-15). In fact, series can overcome the confined structure of the biopic by including elements of "vacillation, contradictions, and gradual changes"—elements that Lena Levy criticizes as often missing in the biopic—simply because there is more room to unfold a narrative (87). While *Dickinson* is still condensed in time and follows a narrative structure, the characters get more space to evolve and think. In the following, I will categorize the series in relation to three established subcategories of the biopic—investigatory, postmodern, and revisionist feminist biopics, all with a focus on the portrayal of women—, arguing that the series expands and thus modernizes the genre of the biopic, pushing against its formal restrictions.

Dickinson most closely aligns with what Hollinger calls "[i]nvestigatory biopics" in which the lives of complex protagonists are explored through multiple perspectives (160).[4] The series shares aspects with postmodern biopics which "adopt a self-reflexive, ironic, and sometimes absurdist tone, that questions whether piecing together all the aspects of one person's life is really informative or even possible" (160). Most importantly, due to its feminist re-writing of Dickinson—as a creative, self-determined poet instead of an isolated spinster—the series can also be read as a revisionist feminist biopics (161; in reference to Bingham 2010). Instead of blaming women for their (professional) failures, revisionist feminist biopics highlight

[4] Hollinger works in close reference to Bingham's study (160).

constraints imposed on women by patriarchal systems (Hollinger 162). *Dickinson* thus shares and combines aspects from all three subcategories of the biopic genre.

The struggle against a patriarchal system is a recurring theme in *Dickinson*: Emily's experiences with pressures to publish illustrate a prominent criticism of the patriarchy. The character Samuel Bowles, based on the important New England editor of the *Springfield Republican* and longtime correspondent of Dickinson, exemplifies these patriarchal structures. Bowles is introduced in the opening of the second season as a very flamboyant and fascinating character who declares his interest in Emily. "You're interesting. I'm interested" (2, 1, 25:50), the character of Bowles remarks after meeting the poet at Sue's soiree. After winning a baking contest in the next episode, Emily is awarded an interview with him and they go for a walk in Amherst (2, 2, 14:25 f.). Bowles compliments her poetry, but at some point Emily asks Bowles what would happen if she wanted to remain unknown and stay away from fame (2,2 18:25). Bowles responds: "I love this modesty act. It's so perfectly lady like. I mean, go ahead. Pretend to be this shy little daisy. But I'll come along and I'll pluck you from obscurity. Just like this." (2, 2, 18:30-18:47), plucking a daisy to underline his words. This scene echoes Dickinson's poem "The Daisy follows soft the Sun" (M89), a poem which criticizes how patriarchy demands women "softly" follow men and defer to their authority:

> The Daisy follows soft the Sun –
> And when his golden walk is done –
> Sits shyly at his feet –
> He – waking – finds the flower there –
> Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?
> Because, Sir, love is sweet!
>
> We are the Flower – Thou the Sun!
> Forgive us, if as days decline –
> We nearer steal to Thee!
> Enamored of the parting West –
> The peace – the flight – the amethyst –
> Night's possibility (M89)

The series, thus, interweaves an interpretation of the daisy poem with a reflection of gendered power dynamics and subtly links it to how Dickinson navigated these structures in her own life: While Dickinson was in contact with many important editors such as Higginson, Bowles or Josiah Holland, and had several opportunities to publish her poetry, she decided against it.[5] The series emphasizes and explains that, instead of yielding to the demands of male publishers, Dickinson chose to remain a private poet, sharing her work through

[5] As Dickinson declared in a letter to her posthumous editor Higginson: "I had told you I did not print" (L484). Further, Dickinson complained about how he edited her poem in a smoothed over version of her verse in "A narrow fellow in the grass" (M489): "I deceive it was robbed of me – defeated too of the third line by the punctuation" (L484).

correspondence—especially after she realized that publication came at the cost of adapting her writing to suit their expectations. The fact that Dickinson had to assert herself in a male-dominated publishing sphere, where publishers aimed to "pluck" poetry from her and smooth her verses to their liking, makes her decision against publication a powerful feminist statement through which she sets herself free from male power and pressures. By reversing the imagery of this poem, making Emily the sun and not the daisy, the series reframes her as a literary genius rather than a passive recipient of male approval.[6] This aligns with the way Dickinson coyly wrote to the important men in the publishing industry as well as with scholarship on Dickinson's letters, which has convincingly argued that Dickinson adapted timid and submissives personas in her letters as a strategy to mask her intellectual size, given the historical circumstances for female writers in the nineteenth century (Lebow 95), when female intellect was considered a health threat for women (cf. Wells 226).

Emily eventually gives her manuscripts to Bowles but later demands them back and, in one climax of the series, the struggles, oppositions, and repressions women experienced within the male-dominated publishing sphere are made particularly clear. Bowles refuses her wish and taunts her with claims that women are unable to control their emotions, saying: "Don't let your emotions get in the way of your career. That is always what happens to women" (2, 10, 7:27 f.). Rather than accepting Emily's decision, Bowles argues with her and, finally, he grabs his bag containing the manuscripts, runs out and escapes on a carriage. Emily, agitated and frustrated, yells "You are the devil," to which Bowles responds: "I am a feminist" (2, 10, 09:09-9:12). As this dialogue exemplifies, though Bowles's proclaims himself a feminist, he asserts control over Emily and her work and argues he knows what is best for her, while discovering and publishing Emily's poems clearly serves his own career ambitions. His feminism is ultimately a façade, a justification to use women (and their work) for his own personal gain. The scene further underlines how little power female writers had over their manuscripts, which was particularly true for Dickinson, who felt "robbed" of every dash when her poems were published. The fight over her manuscripts subverts an important trope of female biopics that often focus on women, who were overshadowed by men and whose public reputations were defined by suffering and victimization (Bingham 214). *Dickinson* instead presents the poet as an empowered, assertive figure who reclaims her agency by standing up to Bowles and—eventually and with help from her maid—regains control over her work and her creative freedom. Overcoming conceptual constraints of the biopic, *Dickinson* contributes to the feminist counter-public sphere by portraying Dickinson as a self-empowered poet who makes a decisive break from the pressures of publication to prioritize her creative autonomy.

[6] This is how landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted expresses it when he helps Emily to overcome her writer's block: "refuse to be the daisy and start being the sun" (2, 4, 24:18-24:22).

By reframing the narrative around Dickinson's limited publication record, the show invites viewers to empathize with her struggles and to understand her choices in a new light.

Dickinson not only challenges the biopic trope of men overshadowing women, both professionally and privately, but also subverts the common portrayal of female degradation, the way women are depicted in their (professional) downfall, which is often "dramatize[d], with proper Aristotelian pity and terror" (Bingham 220). While Emily endures many hardships—including lost love, death, family conflicts, and the horrors of the Civil War—she always emerges stronger. Emily never succumbs to these challenges; instead, she often gains a new perspective on her struggles, confronts her emotions, acknowledges her fears, and channels them into her art. For instance, when her aunt Lavinia dies and the family is engulfed by grief, Emily is inspired by a small bird she believes is her aunt's spirit. The series frames this moment as the origin of her poem "Hope is the thing with feathers" (M150), in which she turns her sorrow into creative expression (3, 1, 05:12/35:14).

Emily's maturing into a poet can be read as a coming-of-age story. The biopic as "a form [...] is about self-identification and self-invention, but it is also about identification with others" (Bingham 378), and therefore already reminiscent of coming-of-age stories. This renders Emily growing into a poet an ideal theme for both the biopic and a coming-of-age story, ultimately overcoming restrictive genre boundaries. Emily matures throughout the series and while her coming-of-age journey unfolds on screen, it mirrors key moments from Dickinson's life: Sue moving in with Austin next door, Dickinson's relationships with literary figures and (posthumous) editors like Thomas Higginson and Samuel Bowles, her quest for solitude in Amherst, and her decision to only wear white—all these elements from the show align with formative events from Dickinson's early thirties. Emily is portrayed as someone deeply and truly in love with Sue beginning in the first episode, but we also see her exploring different relationships and love interests—such as her relationship with Ben Newton—and navigating the complexities of her connection with Sue, echoing the ups and downs of most young adult's emotional growth process. The show also highlights Dickinson's active social life in Amherst as a young woman, combining fact and fiction by showing Emily hosting house parties, organizing a Shakespeare club, experimenting with opium, and engaging in everyday struggles, such as coping with her period. While there is no evidence of Dickinson taking drugs, the house parties of the series are more akin to twenty-first-century parties than to soirees of the nineteenth century—with the characters twerking to Carnage's "I Like Tuh." These experiences roughly align with letters from Dickinson's youth that reveal her active social engagement and highlight that Dickinson did engage actively with her friends and contemporaries, especially while growing up. Corresponding to scholarship proving that she was not an isolated spinster, the series translates Dickinson's social engagements into scenes more reminiscent of contemporary coming-of-age films.

As part of its feminist reworking of the biopic and its use of the coming-of-age story, *Dickinson* allows Emily to visibly mature throughout the series, using this progression to reframe her chosen isolation not as reclusion but as a deliberate rejection of social conventions. Visual

elements underscore the development of Emily's style and demeanor as she confidently settles into her vocation as a poet: Thorough the seasons she begins tying her hair back, dresses more conventionally, and develops a growing interest in the well-being of her family. By the end of the series, Emily is shown in her self-designed signature white dress untying her hair once more. The feminist subplots portraying the evolving relationships Emily cultivates, combined with her process of maturation, lead the poet to discover her voice and to challenge both society and her father—not in a youthful, rebellious manner, but with a serious, resolute, and adult determination. Perhaps most clearly, Emily first self-identifies as a poet in the presence of her father in the end of season one: "Father. I am a poet. 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" (1, 10, 28:53 f.). This moment signifies a critical turning point for Emily, one where she asserts her identity and her artistic vocation and one in which the series resists depicting women artists as tragic or silenced figures. Instead, Emily is portrayed as assertive and self-confident, claiming space for her art. Her father, fully aware of her determination, agrees with Emily and leaves her alone in her room—just as she would be throughout much of her life, writing the "greatest poems ever written." This isolation, however, is not one of loneliness but of creative freedom, allowing Dickinson the space to realize her genius. Her solitude is now seen as "an escape but also a solution", as Juhasz points out (87), and her room becomes the place in which she could let her mind work in peace. Emily's poetic coming-of-age journey culminates in the very last episode of the show with her having redefined both her wardrobe and her sense of purpose.[7]

The series thus portrays Emily's journey as a poetic coming-of-age story, showing how she finds her place and grows into her role as a female poet by maturing, struggling, and ultimately asserting her independence. This narrative is clearly inspired by important feminist scholarship of the 1970s, which laid the groundwork for reading Dickinson as a proto-feminist, celebrating her "achievement in maneuvering between life and art as a woman in contention with a male-dominated society" (Martin 126).[8] Alena Smith employs much of the feminist research on the poet, overcoming restrictions of genre and mediating scholarship from text to popular culture, creating an alternative space for the poet in a feminist counter-public sphere. By reframing a "male-created idea of Dickinson as 'myth'" (Martin 126), the series employs more recent scholarship to reposition Dickinson within her contexts (cf. Richards *Dickinson in Context)* and in relation to her popular culture (cf. Runzo *Emily Dickinson and*

[7] Death—often personified during the series—tells Emily that she needs a uniform after she told him that his suit "is fire" (3,10 3:07 f.): Death then no longer dresses in black but in white, having redefined his uniform as well.

[8] Further, relevant scholarly work includes Adrienne Rich ("Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson") or Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination)*. Later works have explored how Dickinson engaged with her environment, what she read, and how well informed she was about current events (Eliza Richard's edited volume *Emily Dickinson in Context*).

Popular Culture).[9] In doing so, the show presents Emily's coming-of-age not just as a personal development but as a political and poetic act of self-definition and resistance. Thus, the series reimagines Dickinson's legacy, positioning her life and work firmly within the feminist counter-public sphere and making her story profoundly relevant in today's political climate with countless setbacks to progressive and liberal politics as well as backlashes against feminism and diversity measures.

Gender Roles, Sexuality, and Women's Rights in *Dickinson*[10]

Dickinson blends fact, fiction, and fantastical elements to explore nineteenth-century norms, while incorporating modern feminist and queer perspectives that resonate deeply with scholarship on Dickinson. By examining gender roles, sexuality, and women's rights in both private and public spheres, the series connects historical constraints with contemporary feminist discourse. Ultimately, the series reframes Dickinson not as a reclusive eccentric madwoman in the attic, but as a fiercely private and visionary poet who used her creativity to challenge the norms of her time.

One of the ways in which the series establishes Emily's defiance of nineteenth-century gender roles is by letting her fluidly navigate established norms. She cross-dresses to attend a chemistry lecture (1f.), immerses herself in literature, regularly engages in intellectual debates, yet also conforms to gender norms when spending hours tending to her garden. Emily, thus, defines her own role as a woman in the series, rebelling against the norms that constrict her while enjoying some of the leisure activities meant for women in the nineteenth century, such as gardening and expanding her knowledge of botany. At the same time, Emily's views are presented in contrast with those of her father, Edward, who—much like the real Edward Dickinson—believes women have a certain, restricted place in society, particularly when it comes to publishing. This fictionalized ideological conflict leads to heated arguments including a scene in which Edward physically disciplines his daughter—a moment that not only highlights the complicated relationship between the poet and her father but also underscores the societal norms and practices that Dickinson had to face and overcome during her lifetime.

Dickinson's portrayal of gender roles in both private and public spheres articulates a feminist counter-public sphere that resonates with contemporary audiences, highlighting how the series (re)shapes feminist discourses in ways that challenge dominant cultural narratives.[11] The constraints of a daily routine as well as possible tensions between men and women are

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[9] This article only reflects a fraction of the feminist work that has been done on Dickinson in the past. For a quick overview I recommend Wendy Martin's chapter on the reception of Dickinson in *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (pp. 110-31).

[10] For more scholarship on Dickinson, gender, and sexuality in particular, I recommend Martha Nell Smith's *Rowing in Eden* or, for a briefer introduction, "Susan and Emily Dickinson: their Lives, in Letters."

[11] Both Finnerty and Russo have dedicted part of their studies to the gender roles in *Dickinson.* The following first scene is, for instance, also central to Russo's analysis.

given time to unfold on the screen in order to illustrate the restrictions of nineteenth-century private life for women. The series, hence, establishes Emily privately within the structures of a nineteenth-century household, in which she has certain responsibilities that in turn restrict her writing process. In the first episode, we see Emily wake up, light a candle, and begin writing a poem on a scrap of paper—only to be interrupted by her sister, Vinnie, who tells her she must fetch water (1, 1, 1:27 f.). When Emily questions why Austin cannot do it, Vinnie simply answers, "Austin is a boy" (1, 1, 2:25). Frustrated but unable to argue, Emily mutters, "[t]his is such bullshit," before leaving at 4 a.m. to fetch water. As she draws up her water buckets from the well, she quietly says "because I could not stop for death," a reference to one of her most famous poems, which also serves as the title of the episode. Viewers are also confronted with the circumstances in which women in the nineteenth century were often forced to create their literature: Amid fulfilling their "expected" tasks of housewifery. Still, we see Emily creating poetry even while completing these tasks, thereby defying one of the constraints society puts on her and creating space for her work whenever she can. While Emily walks back home, the scene is accompanied by an electro-pop song with the lyrics, "hear me no one, sees me no one, I'm off the radar," (1, 1, 3:10-3:18) which fittingly mirrors the isolation and obscurity Dickinson chose during her lifetime until her legacy was reclaimed a few decades ago. This musical choice not only emphasizes the timelessness of Emily's struggle but reinforces the idea that women's voices are often marginalized, "off the radar," and must find subversive modes of expression via "double-voiced discourses" (Showalter 201-02). Her mother and Vinnie are already working in the kitchen when Dickinson enters the house, a scene which subtly establishes the gendered expectations placed on women in households of the nineteenth century. The series thus uses these domestic scenes not only to highlight nineteenth-century gendered restriction, but also to illustrate how women might have carved out spaces for intellectual and creative resistance within patriarchal confines.

While resisting gendered expectations of domestic life, Emily also challenges the institution of marriage. In contrast to Vinnie, who seems more open to marriage and a domestic life, Emily rejects this role for women and shows little interest in marriage.[12] Consequently, she refuses multiple marriage proposals throughout the series—from both younger and older men—and frequently reflects on the limitations of being a woman, mainly seen fit to marry a husband but certainly not to undertake a serious poetic project. Discussing one of the proposals Emily had received, her mother scolds Emily for having dropped a cat in a suitor's lap (1, 1, 4:45).

[12] Mrs. Dickinson, on the other hand, embraces her role as the "perfect" housewife, proudly declaring herself the best in New England, which is part of the reason why she is opposed to hiring a maid, but ultimately must succumb to her husband's authority. Mrs. Dickinson's own rebellion, however, occurs in season two, during a scene in which neither her husband nor any male guest appreciate her throwing two simultaneous tea parties—one at her house and one at Austin's— and hustling between them. It is in this moment that she eventually speaks out about the state of the world, blaming men's bad manners for the outbreak of the Civil War (2, 9, 16:47 f.). This further illustrates that the nineteenth-century image of women as mere housewives, trapped in a patriarchal relationship, is repressive and deserving of rebellion—regardless of whether women find fulfillment in this role.

Emily lightly responds that she wanted it to be like a "cat's offering," underlining her disinterest in marriage. When her mother reminds her that she is not a cat, Emily responds: "No. Tragically, I'm a woman," (1, 1, 4:55), indicating that a cat has more freedom to move around unbothered than a woman. This humorous deflection serves as a critique of the expectation that women must be pleasant and willing to marry, reinforcing Emily's resistance to traditional gender roles.

Emily's rejection of marriage is made particularly clear when she describes it as a patriarchal prison. The only person who shares her views is Ben Newton, the man she might have married (as the series at least suggests).[13] When discussing the sound of marriage vows, Newton begins to explain how they sound to him—especially the part of "take this woman to have and to hold" –, but Emily interrupts him remarking that they sound like "imprisonment" (1, 6, 18:14-18:35). Similarly, in season two Vinnie calls off her engagement, declaring that she does not believe in monogamy and views marriage as a "patriarchal system designed to make women less autonomous" (2, 3, 12:01-12:05).[14] Vinnie's anachronistic declaration, as Russo also mentions, offers viewers an affective entrance into the world of the nineteenth century: Although the historical figure Lavinia Dickinson would never have used the term "monogamy" (2,3 11:50), contemporary viewers are invited to rethink how relationships have evolved by being spoken to in familiar language and vocabulary. Vinnie's feminist speech culminates in telling her sister Emily: "I learned from the best" (2, 3, 12:22), showing how Emily's feminist stance also subtly influences women around her. The series stresses how the bond between sisters, and women in general, fosters an understanding of possible independence and mutual empowerment. It further provides a feminist, powerful spin to the narrative of the "Dickinson spinsters," both in language and concept, that transcends the centuries, making both Dickinson sisters and their spinsterhood more relatable. Moreover, it insinuates that they might both have *chosen* to remain unmarried—although this is of course mainly speculation when it comes to Lavinia Dickinson.

Emily's rejection of marriage is also connected to her love for Sue. The series takes a clear stance towards the much discussed and very likely queerness of the poet, culminating years of queer scholarship on Dickinson: Famously first conducted by Rebecca Patterson's *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1951)—and harshly rejected—and later successfully expanded by Martha Nell Smith in *Rowing in Eden* (1992). Emily's supposed relationship with her brother's wife, Susan Gilbert Dickinson is made unmistakably clear and creates a space for their relationship to flourish in a queer counter-public. From the very first episode it is evident that

[13] Finnerty reads Newton as "seemingly gay" (17), adding another layer to the characters in the series and making their relationships even more complex.

[14] In a longer monologue Vinnie says to her friends: "So this Saturn retrograde has got me questioning things with Ship. I mean, I know he's really hot, and he lives in my house, and that's convenient, but I think he may have the wrong idea about me. He thinks that it's my dream to become some obedient housewife, but it's not. I wanna be free. I wanna have adventures. … Look, I don't even know if I believe in monogamy" (2, 3, 11:53-12:23).

Emily and Sue are deeply in love and that they share a complex, intimate bond. The first episode includes a scene in which Emily sends Sue a note, hinting at the many letters the two will exchange despite living so close to each other (1, 1, 14:00 f.). This note tells Sue to meet Emily in the orchard, where Emily confronts Sue about her engagement to Austin. Their conversation leads to a kiss beneath a large apple tree—reminiscent of the Garden of Eden and the trope of the "forbidden fruit." Even though Sue might be "forbidden fruit," their love prevails through all three seasons, leaving no doubt that their feelings are true and reversing the symbol of the forbidden apple. While Emily and Sue talk about how they cannot be together or raise a child as a couple, they never actually address the underlying societal norms or expectations, leaving a gap for the viewer to fill in and compare to the rights and visibility of queer couples in the twenty-first century. Queer culture and sexuality is forced to constitute itself apart from mainstream culture and opinions in a queer counter-public, both during Dickinson's time and today (Berlant and Warner 558). The series effectively alludes to the difficulties that queer couples might still encounter today. Further, the show emphasizes the complicated circumstances Dickinson and her sister-in-law had to navigate during a time when there was no vocabulary to talk about lest enforce their relationship.

While the series offers a deeply personal view of Emily's struggles with gender and sexuality, it also reimagines her public legacy as a poet. By intertwining surrealism, fantastical elements, and biography, *Dickinson* challenges the long-held notion of the "mad spinster" and instead presents Emily as an intentional, visionary, and highly creative artist who consciously shapes her poetic world. By presenting Emily's bursts of creativity as surreal, even bizarre events that transport her into alternate realities, the series does not portray her as mad but as a creative poetic genius within a feminist counter-public sphere. Although Dickinson's choice to live a relatively isolated life resulted in her being framed as an isolated spinster and a recluse, the series suggests that she might have desired that privacy and space to write her poetry and to allow her creativity all the time and space it needed. Her spontaneously uttered bits of poetry—such as "Fame is a fickle" (M666) or "Forever is composed of nows" (M334)—are presented almost as fleeting thoughts, with Emily herself remarking that she urgently needs to write them down. These moments emphasize the uncontainable flow of Dickinson's imagination and help to transform the posthumous framing of the poet from an isolated mad spinster into a woman that *chose* to live solely with her family, carefully selecting her correspondents and visitors to cultivate an environment in which to create poetry that would eventually transcend time and space.

The most striking example of Emily's powerful imagination are her frequent encounters with Death, who regularly picks her up for drives in his carriage. These scenes are prominent and recurring manifestations of her imaginative life—instead of reinforcing the narrative of Dickinson as death-obsessed given her loneliness, the series reframes one of the poet's dominant themes as a statement of her boundless creativity and poetic genius, based on a Dickinson poem in which she goes on a drive with death:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality. (M239)

Expanding the famous metaphor, the series allows for a fictional friendship between Death and Emily that begins in the very first episode and continues throughout the series, positioning Death as a constant companion and significant subject of the poet's work. Wiz Khalifa's portrayal of Death adds an unexpected, humorous, and deeply contemporary layer to the character; Emily and Death share a complex friendship—sometimes full of conflict, but always deeply connected. These meetings with Death, along with Emily's other flights of imagination (such as talking to flowers, imagining giant bees, or literally wandering through personal infernos), may initially seem bizarre or eccentric. While Russo convincingly reads these moments as magical realism (180), I argue that they also effectively illustrate the boundless nature of Emily's creativity. For instance, in season one Emily imagines attending a circus, an event her father forbade her to go to earlier in the episode.[15] In her imagination, she is the "freak" on stage, introduced as "The moment you've all been waiting for…a female poet" (1, 7, 24:10). The absurdity of the situation—the audience fainting and cheering—serves as poignant commentary not only on Dickinson's desires and fears (Finnerty 20), but on her self-awareness as a poet. These scenes also have a vital narrative function because they allow the series to explore Emily's creative process, offering a new visual way to show how someone like Dickinson, choosing to live a largely private life, could produce such profound and imaginative poetry. Further, these creative moments of escape personify some of Dickinson's main poetic themes: Nature (bees and flowers in particular), life, and death. Thus, although seeming exaggerated, these scenes do not reinforce the stereotype of Dickinson as eccentric or mad; rather, they highlight her complex, vivid inner life, which the series frames as integral to her process of writing.

Lastly, the series also presents striking interactions between Emily and other poets which not only serve to remind the audience of Dickinson's extensive readings but also further challenge the narrative of Dickinson as an isolated and weird recluse. During one of these encounters, Emily meets Walt Whitman at a war hospital. Whitman, another central poet of the nineteenth century and formative to Modernist movements, is only mentioned once in Dickinson's correspondence, when she writes to Higginson in 1862: "You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful—"(L338). While Dickinson claims to never have read Whitman, she was still aware of him and his poetry. The series expands this fleeting reference into an entire encounter between the poets that Emily imagines while reading *Leaves of Grass* in season three. Whitman's character embodies the very spirit of creativity and physicality that Emily admires in his poetry. When asked to "keep it down," Whitman simply contradictorily responds: "I will keep it down, and I will keep it up.

[15] A reference to Dickinson's enthusiasm for the circus (Runzo 1).

And I will keep it going on and on until the break of dawn. You see I am a poet of the body, and a poet of the soul. So what is pain to me but just another side of pleasure" (3, 4, 16:40 f.).[16] Whitman's loud, exuberant personality, unapologetic about his sexuality and his provocative approach to life, challenges Emily in unexpected ways. In one memorable scene, after confessing her love for Sue to Whitman in a cathartic outburst—"I love Sue! Okay? I love Sue! And I want her! And I can't get enough of her! And if I was on my deathbed right now, all I would want is Sue!"—Whitman responds with enthusiasm: "Hell, yes! Now that's a poem!" (3, 4, 27:25 f.). This exchange, while humorous, emphasizes the tension between Dickinson's more reserved poetic voice and Whitman's flamboyant, larger-than-life persona, highlighting the diversity of poetic expression and the need for both forms of creative energy. Further, it creates a connection between Whitman and Dickinson, two of the most formative poets of the nineteenth century in American literary history. Although the meeting and the poets' personas are fictionalized, it portrays Dickinson in conversation with her contemporaries—as she very much was.[17]

The fantastical encounters with death, her peers, and alternative realities not only give depth to Dickinson's poetic vision but also create a space where the limits of gender, society, and artistic expression can be expanded. In doing so, the series challenges our perception of Dickinson, offering a more nuanced, layered portrayal of one of America's greatest poets—a poet who is not merely defined by her seclusion or her eccentricities, but by her boundless, transformative creativity.

Conclusion: Dickinson Rewritten

As demonstrated, *Dickinson* masterfully blurs the lines between fact and fiction—not because the series abandons historical accuracy altogether, but because it purposefully fills gaps in Emily Dickinson's life with a narrative that reframes her as more than just the "original sad girl" that Sylvia Plath's character enviously describes her as (3, 7). Dickinson is transformed into an empowered, queer, proud, and unapologetically feminist poet based on decades of queer and feminist scholarship. The series offers a contemporary lens through which to view the poet who, despite her decision to live a very private life resulting in society's misinterpretations of her as a madwoman in the attic, became a revolutionary voice in American poetry. *Dickinson* positions itself securely in a feminist counter-public sphere that, due to it being a popular series, allows a broader audience to affectively engage with

[16] This is a clear allusion to Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (246).

[17] Other literary figures Emily encounters in her imagined worlds include a dead Edgar Allan Poe (2, 8, 26:00), who reflects on his struggles with alcoholism and his dark, brooding persona, and Henry David Thoreau (1,4), whose idealization of nature is undercut by his privilege and hypocrisy. Sylvia Plath also makes a crucial appearance in season three, —also examined by Finnerty (22) and Russo (185-186)—offering a particularly poignant critique of how society perceives and labels female writers.

academic, feminist scholarship. Although the series takes its fictional liberties and incorporates modern attitudes, music and language within a historical context, *Dickinson* provides a nuanced understanding of how women's rights, female progressivism and publication wishes were constrained by nineteenth-century society, while simultaneously creating a unique space to represent the poet's creative imagination.

What is more, *Dickinson's* combination of pop-cultural language, attitudes and modern ideals transforms the poet herself into a contemporary role model much needed in a time of major setbacks to progressive and liberal politics.[18] In an era marked by the rise of right-wing populism, increasing attacks on women's rights, and the ongoing struggle for reproductive justice, feminist re-imaginings like *Dickinson* are more important than ever. The series provides a model of resistance—not just through poetry, but through the very act of re-writing history in a way that challenges dominant, patriarchal interpretations. By embedding contemporary language, music, and attitudes within the context of the nineteenth century, the series creates a connection between the audience and Dickinson, making her story feel relatable and relevant today. This approach resonates with Berlant's notion of "vague belonging" (5), in which the audience "vaguely" connects to the Emily on the screen. Through this connection the series reflects what Berlant calls "hard to manage in the lived real" (5): Ongoing struggles for equality, not only regarding sex and gender. *Dickinson,* thus, embeds progressive ideals—rooted in feminism, queer theory, and social justice—within the very structure of its storytelling. In a society that desperately needs these ideals, the show provides a necessary reminder that literature and art have the power to ignite change, inspire resistance, and fuel the fight for equality.

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[18] For a closer analysis of how the show blends political events and developments of the nineteenth century with the 2010s, see Russo pp. 173-174.

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