Proofs of Genius
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Published by University of Michigan Press

Gailey, Amanda.
Proofs of Genius: Collected Editions from the American Revolution to the Digital Age.

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CHAPTER 2

Dickinson’s Remains

This chapter and the next will focus on how the nineteenth-century collected edition influenced the publication histories of two giants of the American poetry canon, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. The story of Dickinson’s first posthumous volume of poems is often recounted as evidence of how her poetry was long mishandled: the first editors took great liberties with her poems, “correcting” and titling them in ways that seem benighted to readers today. One commercial publisher refused the volume, and her family eventually paid for its publication—further evidence that readers didn’t appreciate the genius under their noses. That the poems were edited at all by her brother’s longtime mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, is also sometimes recounted as regrettable, because it possibly came at the expense of a different and more sympathetic handling by her confidante and sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson.¹ Such criticisms are understandable, but what has been lost in discussions of her first edition is how it was edited, published, and received as part of the long, feminized genre of literary or poetical remains, posthumous collections of work by authors who were typically but not always single, amateur women or girls. This chapter traces the development of the genre in the nineteenth-century United States in order to show how it provides a context for better understanding Dickinson’s Poems.

In the May 24, 1899, issue of the Philadelphia North American, an editor complained:

In burning all her literary accumulations—her unpublished lectures, essays, poems, orations, and the like—Mrs. Mary A. Livermore has set an example of which other persons of public prominence would do well to follow. Near-
ly every man and woman who has written much has thrown aside, either as unworthy or as subject to future revision, far more articles than he or she has published. Immediately after the death of a successful writer publishers are eager to take advantage of the revival of interest in his name, and look for literary remains, regardless of the fact that they may tarnish the fame of the dead. Many a reputation has suffered from ill-advised posthumous publications.  

By the close of the century, the phenomenon of literary remains had become not only commonplace but also notorious. Yet remarkably little has been written about literary remains, even though the subject provides an illuminating lens through which to view the intersection of ideas about death, gender, and creative genius in nineteenth-century America. Samantha Matthews’s *Poetical Remains: Poets’ Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* is the only in-depth study, and it focuses exclusively on British authors, though many of Matthews’s observations about the rise of the genre in England apply to the United States. Matthews sees literary remains and bodily remains as intertwined, and convincingly argues that Victorian readers viewed the book as “the embodied medium of the dead poet’s spirit, while the body was attributed with a lingering spiritual aura.”  

Literary remains became a nexus where the author’s biography and spirit were brought together after his or her death, satisfying the pronounced Victorian interest in the moment of death, the fate of the body, the legacy of the spirit, and the rituals with which the living showed due deference to the dead.  

In the United States, literary remains, also often called poetical remains, were similarly fueled by changing nineteenth-century death customs. Like the tomb, the death mask, and death portraiture, literary remains functioned as an attempt to capture something of the fleeting essence of the departed, and to preserve it as long as possible in an earthly afterlife that shadowed the one presumably enjoyed by the spirit. Of these various means of preservation, literary remains were, as a genre, perhaps most like death portraiture, the memento mori that captured an image of the corpse shortly after death, often in a lifelike pose. Both were usually intended for duplication and distribution to friends and family, and both were made possible by the development of new printing technologies that put print-based memorials within financial reach of middle-income families.
1. “LIFTING THE SHROUD FROM THE STILL FACE OF THE DEAD”

Literary remains typically comprised two parts, a memoir of the life of the author by the most prominent person the family could call upon to write such a thing, followed by what usually purported to be a comprehensive collection of the author's writings, or at least of her poetic works. While the collections were not always complete, even by the day's standards, they seemed to be so because of their inclusion of heterogeneous forms, letters, and textual debris that was usually accompanied by a caveat that incomplete or unpolished verse was included for the sake of giving the reader a complete picture of the author's intellectual labor, even if the rougher pieces were not themselves of high literary merit.

Literary remains also served as a way to collect and distribute literary property to a deceased author's friends and family, usually with an editor serving as an executor. The form appealed to both professionals and amateurs, but seemed to begin as an amateur form that broadened its scope to professional authors as the century progressed. The earliest instances of literary remains were from amateur authors, and we must assume that far more of these were produced than survive today, given that they were so often privately published and distributed and were not as likely to be owned by libraries, universities, or even private collections in the numbers that professionally published, commercially available books were. Nonetheless, enough of these volumes survive to indicate that the phenomenon of collecting the works of a deceased author and distributing them to friends, family, or the public at large, held wide appeal to the burgeoning numbers of middle-class readers at a time when simultaneous developments in printing technology made the production of such volumes an affordable way of memorializing and reifying the intellectual output of even amateur authors.

Literary remains accommodated a range of materials and authors. The earliest extant example of literary remains in the United States is an unpublished scrapbook from 1809 of journal entries, letters, and clippings kept by Helen Masterton, an obscure private citizen who chronicled her travels. After her death, the owner of the scrapbook, possibly her sister, labeled it “Literary [sic] Remains,” indicating an early use of the term to describe written detritus that family of a dead person were interested in gathering and preserving. As the genre became more popular over the century, it came not
only to accommodate sensational public figures, such as the famous prostitute and murder victim Maria Bickford (discussed in chapter 1), but also respected public figures such as Sam Houston, whose Life and Literary Remains were published in 1884, and prominent figures such as Henry James Sr., whose Literary Remains were edited by his son, William James, the same year. However, the typical author enshrined by a volume of literary remains was obscure, and the volume was usually framed as an homage to his or her genius and modesty. The authors were disproportionately young and female, and their lifelong physical and psychological abnormalities, as well as their admirable virtues, are often described at length in the accompanying memoir. As a way of collecting and revering the intellectual product of people who had not lived long enough, healthily enough, or with enough legal privilege to accumulate other kinds of property or accomplishments, literary remains unsurprisingly tended to house the work of unmarried women and young men.

One early volume, The Literary Remains of John G. C. Brainard, was published in 1832 in Hartford, Connecticut, and evidences characteristics that would be found in many other volumes of literary remains. Brainard had dabbled in a legal profession before undertaking newspaper work and making an effort at a literary career, but died at age thirty-three of tuberculosis before his efforts could fully pay off. Upon his death, John Greenleaf Whittier, who was living in Hartford and editing the New England Weekly Review at the time, undertook the volume of literary remains, possibly on request of the family. Whittier’s memoir of the author is at once reverential toward Brainard’s genius and cognizant of his mediocrity as a writer, a contradictory position that makes sense if Whittier was called upon to eulogize a colleague whose work he did not wholly want to endorse: while engaging nineteenth-century veneration of the artistic spirit, he also notes the faults in the writing. Whittier begins by writing, “There is a feeling of reverence associated with our reminiscences of departed worth and genius.” He continues by recognizing the uncanny connection between the literary remains and the earthly remains:

I feel in no ordinary degree, the peculiar delicacy of the task I have undertaken. It is like lifting the shroud from the still face of the dead, that the living may admire its yet lingering loveliness. I almost feel as if I were writing in the presence of the disembodied spirit of the departed;—as if the eye of his
Like a death mask or memento mori, which memorialize the character of the dead, the literary remains seem to capture the fleeting genius in a moment between death and oblivion. Whittier describes Brainard as a man who was sickly and sensitive about his short stature, demurred from public attention, “would not talk of himself,” and made “the least outward claim to attention.” “A gentle retirement into the calm beauty of his own mind rendered him in a measure indifferent to the opinion of the world,” Whittier explains, in a sentence that could be repurposed for any number of authors of literary remains.

Whittier also noted that many of Brainard’s poems were flawed: “hasty, careless, and even in some instances below mediocrity—serving only as a foil to the exceeding beauty of the others.” Such an unflattering comment seems out of place in a memorial volume, but was necessitated by two ingredients of literary remains: an attempt at collecting all the works—good, bad, polished, and roughly drafted—of the dead author, and an editor with a reputation that would be harmed by complimenting poor writing. Consequently, many volumes of literary remains include an acknowledgment of the weaknesses of some of the writing, cushioned in a memoir that praises the exceptional character and prodigious talent of the author. Whittier, who was writing at a time when American letters were still germinal and particularly vulnerable to assault, explained his admiration for uneven writing in patriotic terms: “As an American I am proud of the many gifted spirits who have laid their offerings upon the altar of our national literature,” he explains, adding further on, “There is one important merit in his poetry which would redeem a thousand faults. It is wholly American.” For Whittier, the volume required a delicate balance of formal memorializing, criticism that would reflect his own literary acumen and patriotism.

Another literary remains published in 1832, The Literary Remains of Joseph Brown Ladd, M.D., shares the rhetorical context and many of the aims of the Brainard volume. Ladd had died forty-six years earlier in a duel in South Carolina at age twenty-two, but his sister, Elizabeth Ladd Haskins, apparently saw in the emerging trend of literary remains a possibility to memorialize her long-dead brother. In her dedication she writes, “The following publication is an attempt to rescue from oblivion the scattered relics of
a genius which, had it reached maturity, would have shed lustre on the age that produced it.” After acknowledging that her young brother’s poetry does not pass muster with the professional poetry of the 1830s, she explains, much as Whittier does in acknowledging Brainard’s shortcomings, that his interrupted genius brings glory to the young nation, even if the nation’s literary tastes tend in other directions: “it is hoped [the poems] will prove not an unwelcome offering to those who love to dwell upon the early history of our republic; since genius and the labors of genius form an important ingredient in that glory of a nation, which the patriot is wont to contemplate with honest pride.” Literary remains allowed Haskins to gather the intellectual estate of her brother, who died too young to amass a conventional one, and to apologize for their shortcomings by wrapping them up in nationalism.

2. “THE MOST POETICAL TOPIC IN THE WORLD”: HONORING AND INSPECTING THE MODEST WOMAN’S REMAINS

Women authors who were memorialized by literary remains were not as likely as their male counterparts to be framed in terms of national literary identity, but were usually described as having acute senses of modesty, a lack of interest in society and popular literature, a precocity in both literary and spiritual matters that seemed, in some cases, to have supernatural origins, and health or temperament abnormalities that were both piqued by and assuaged by reading and writing. Shira Wolosky has argued that modesty has been profoundly influential on American women’s writing, helping both to circumscribe a woman’s sphere and to provide a means for speaking and writing beyond it. Literary remains pushed the culture of modesty to its extreme, typically honoring the work of a woman or girl that was entirely or mostly kept from public view during her life. Because the remains were published after death, the author’s feminine modesty was beyond reproach, and because the work was ensconced in a single-author volume and accompanied by a biography, it functioned more as a tribute to her modest life than anything she might have published on her own. These posthumous volumes also affirmed and were informed by religious ideology, suggesting that strict adherence to the feminine virtue of meekness in life would bring reward and recognition after death.

Some women who were memorialized in literary remains had published
poems—and they almost invariably wrote poems, rather than fiction or nonfiction—in periodicals, but most were unpublished or published only incidentally before their deaths. When published in literary remains that tied them to authorial biography, the writings offered a peek into a chaste woman’s life: the women were typically described as nunlike, and while they avoided the intrusion of the public in life, posthumous publication offered a glimpse at the purportedly asexual woman’s life and body, which is almost always discussed as infirm, weak, and pathologically feminine. Additionally, literary remains provided a teleological, theodicean narrative for female deprivation: their deaths were often framed as the lamentable outcome of a young intellectual flourishing, and were sometimes discussed as sparing them a descent into an idiocy or madness that may follow premature prodigiosity. Literary remains for women, then, become a posthumous reward for their modesty, a bittersweet conclusion that at once offered a denouement to their tragic lives while demonstrating to the public that such rare, true genius in women may come at the expense of a normal, fulfilling life.

One of the earliest published literary remains of an American woman was *The Literary Remains of Martha Day*, published in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1834. Day died the previous year at age twenty, and had published a few poems in periodicals, though the memoir of her life takes great pains to portray her as eschewing publicity and having “a great aversion to authorship.” Like every other American woman to receive treatment in a literary remains, Day died unmarried, perhaps leaving her friends and family to feel that her life was left so incomplete as to warrant a tribute to her genius, which she would presumably have laid aside for a more important domestic life if she had lived long enough.

Day was the daughter of Rev. Jeremiah Day, the president of Yale, and her literary remains were published for private distribution. She is described by her memoirist in terms that would surface repeatedly in literary remains of young women authors. Day was preternaturally virtuous, pious, and dutiful, and “never supposed that her mental powers and love of literature purchased for her a dispensation from every thing feminine.” She was a “true poetic genius” who was physically fragile—“generally very pale” with a “broad, full, intellectual forehead”—and felt an irresistible urge to write with no corresponding ambition to publish. While she loved poetry, she steered clear of reading fiction, which was too often tawdry and helped “a lazy person pass an idle hour without feeling guilty.” And while she was studious and craved learning, the memoirist is careful to point out
that she did not study “so hard as to injure her health,” keeping her reading in healthy moderation. These balances—moral and intellectual precocity without a health-threatening indulgence of bookishness; an innate need to write without ambition for her writing—resurface in almost all biographical sketches of young women memorialized in literary remains.

No literary remains embody this view of the feminine poetic genius more than those of the Davidson sisters, two poetic prodigies who died young, of tuberculosis, in a long-afflicted family in Plattsburgh, New York. The sisters epitomized the lives behind literary remains, and, by drawing the attention of such public figures as Robert Southey, Washington Irving, Catherine Sedgwick, and Edgar Allan Poe, influenced public perception of amateur women poets for decades. Lucretia was the older sister, and like Martha Day was precociously pious and literary, throwing away books deemed to be of bad character and giving money she intended to spend on books to help her mother. Painting her goodness in a particularly American light, her memoirist, Samuel Morse (who seems to have been locally connected to the family), explains that Lucretia was inspired by the story of George Washington’s character. When she was eleven, she was taken to a celebration of his life, where she was repelled by its ornaments and frivolous pomp, preferring to meditate on the example of his integrity. In an anecdote that seems directly inspired by the Parson Weems tale of Washington and the cherry tree, Lucretia returned home to write an ode to Washington that was so ingenious that her aunt accused her of plagiarism. Lucretia was mortally offended and wrote a poem describing how wounded she was by the accusation, which itself was of such high merit as to dispel any unjust doubt about her character. In this single vignette, the young Lucretia demonstrates her rare spiritual maturity in rejecting the celebration and embracing a symbol of American virtue, while also defending her own honor through her talent. In another anecdote that seems burnished by family retellings, Morse explains that Lucretia once overheard friends discussing whether she was allowed to indulge her poetic temperament too much and should be forced to put down the pen and take on more domestic duties. She took the criticism to heart and gave up writing, but began to waste away and cry uncontrollably until her mother investigated and asked Lucretia to take up writing again, but in balance with domestic work. Like Martha Day, Lucretia was beautiful and pale. She sometimes became so enthralled by writing that she would enter into a trance and forget to eat. As she lay dying of tuberculosis at age sixteen, she was forbidden for the sake of her health
from reading, but surrounded herself on her deathbed with her books, which she fondled and kissed, the books becoming an intimate companion at the hour of death. In a theodicean implication that death was a mercy for her—a suggestion made frequently in literary remains of young women—the last volume in the poem is “The Fear of Madness,” in which she explains she would rather die of her illness than lose her mind:

There is a something which I dread,
It is a dark, a fearful thing;
It steals along with withering tread,
Or sweeps on wild destruction’s wing.

That thought comes o’er me in the hour
Of grief, of sickness, or of sadness;
‘Tis not the dread of death—‘tis more,
It is the dread of madness.

Oh! May these throbbing pulses pause,
Forgetful of their feverish course;
May this hot brain, which burning, glows
With all a fiery whirlpool’s force,

Be cold, and motionless, and still,
A tenant of its lowly bed,
But let not dark delirium steal
* * * * * * * *

[Unfinished.]
This was the last piece she ever wrote.16

The poem leaves off midstanza, and its editorial presentation suggests that in the depths of her fear of madness, death rescued her. She died in 1825, when her sister, Margaret, was only a toddler, and Morse edited the remains of the “genius” “child of genuine poetic feeling” four years later.

Margaret died at age fifteen in 1838, and three years later her literary remains were edited by Washington Irving,17 who had been contacted by the girls’ mother, and that same year a second edition of Lucretia’s literary remains was released, this time edited by Catharine Sedgwick.18 The two girls did not share a volume of remains, but the simultaneous release of the
literary remains through the same publisher (Lea and Blanchard) suggested a link between their geniuses that was corroborated by the biographical narratives. Irving explains that when the elder Lucretia died, “on ascending to the skies, it seemed as if her poetic mantle fell, like a robe of light, on her infant sister.” Indeed, Margaret took up the role as the family literary genius, saying to her mother, “Oh, mamma, I will try to fill her place! Teach me to be like her!” The young Margaret was precociously devout, preferring to stay close to her chronically ill mother’s side and learn about God rather than to play with other children. Irving implausibly reports that while her mother delayed teaching her to read for fear it might “injure her delicate frame,” Margaret soon began spontaneously speaking in verse, describing trees out the window in rhymed iambic tetrameter. When she did play with other children she told them stories with “exalted views of truth, honor, and integrity,” but her “highest pleasures were intellectual” and “she seemed to live in a world of her own creation, surrounded by the images of her own fancy.” Davidson’s mother was in a difficult position, feeling the need to cultivate the rare genius of her second prodigy while understanding that “it was necessary to keep her in check, lest a too intense pursuit of knowledge should impair her delicate constitution.” After Margaret’s death and the synchronous publication of her and her sister’s literary remains, critical interest in the sisters peaked. Southey wrote on Lucretia, and Poe wrote a characteristically critical review while acknowledging the rare talent of the girls. To be sure, the Davidson sisters seem like characters written by Poe—in fact, Margaret had written a dark Romantic poem called “Lenore” that probably drew from the same inspiration as Poe’s “The Raven” (Gottfried Burger’s 1773 ballad “Lenore”), may have influenced his poem, and includes lines with whiffs of Poe in them: “All her glowing dreams are o’er!” “And fields of battle bathed in gore!” “The glowing streamlet flows no more!” and is dedicated “to the spirit of my sister Lucretia.” Although he eventually composed a detailed critique of the young sisters’ poetic shortcomings that seemed in questionable taste, he described “Lenore” as “a romantic love-tale, not ill-conceived in its incidents . . . told with a skill which might put more practised bards to the blush, and with occasional bursts of the truest poetic fire.” Poe—who famously claimed while explaining his composition of “The Raven” that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”—describes Margaret as a “fairy-like child” of “exquisite loveliness,” and eventually argues that her and her sister’s young deaths were for the best:
Just as the most rapidly growing herbage is the most speedy in its decay—just as the ephemera struggles to perfection in a day only to perish in that day’s decline—so the mind is early matured only to be early in its decadence; and when we behold in the eye of infancy the soul of the adult, it is but indulging in a day dream to hope for any farther proportionate development. Should the prodigy survive to ripe age, a mental imbecility, not far removed from idiocy itself, is too frequently the result.\(^{24}\)

Poe’s interpretation of Lucretia’s death may seem outlandish but it was not unique, and echoed Southey’s opinion that Lucretia suffered from an “intellectual fever,” and that, like other child prodigies, she was taken soon from life “for transplantation to a world where there shall be nothing to corrupt or hurt them,” and that Lucretia’s death, specifically, was “a dispensation of mercy.”\(^{25}\) For Poe, like Southey, the remains of the young sisters, both physical and literary, were truly poetic, providing not only the most poetical topic in the world, but also preserving the genius that was mercifully cut short before it sunk into witlessness—the very fate Lucretia feared the most.

The Davidson sisters helped solidify the image of the infirm amateur woman poet who was memorialized in literary remains. When Lucy Hooper died at age twenty-five, she was quickly assimilated into the mold of the Davidson sisters despite having lived a somewhat more public life, publishing some poems and prose in periodicals. Her biographer, the editor John Keese, wrote:

Our American literature has already presented to the student the names of several writers, who at an unusually early age, have manifested abilities of a higher order, and who after a brief but brilliant career, have sunk into their early graves, victims, too often, to severe study, or having run out their physical energies by excessive intellectual excitement. The names of Brainard, and of the two Davids, suggest themselves at once to the reader, and particularly the latter, as exemplifying in a painful degree, the effects of strong mental excitability, (exhibiting itself in the poetic fervor of inspiration,) upon the corporeal frame.\(^{26}\)

Later, he builds on this comparison with the Davids, explaining that all such prodigies, including Hooper, had a preternatural ability to foresee their own early deaths, and that this knowledge imparted to them both a sense of melancholy and of holiness:
It is a somewhat remarkable fact that all who have in the early life passed away to the tomb, after a brief but brilliant career of usefulness or talents, have stamped upon their remains an apprehensive character of sadness and melancholy, that seems—after the event—to foreshadow in prophetic spirit their early doom. And thus we find them all, falling as it were by and in the course of their nature, into a saddened and subdued train of thought and expression—mindful in their brightest moments of enjoying rapture, of the vanity of the present. To the dark unfathomed void of the future, all their thoughts appear to turn . . . as to the home where only they are to find rest.

Readers understood Hooper’s volume as a bittersweet memorial to a life tragically cut short but justly rewarded by both salvation and publication. One reviewer recommended it as “a fit pendant to the collections of Lucretia and Margaret Davidson. Like them Miss Hooper was early called away to receive the reward of her pure and spotless life, and like them too in this little volume she has left behind her a valuable legacy to survivors.” A critic for the Boston Courier wrote a review of Hooper’s volume that spoke so stereotypically to her life and private career that much of it seems to apply to any number of women honored in a volume of literary remains:

Her life was brief, and passed in domestic seclusion, and her biographer has wisely confined himself to a delineation of her mental development and moral traits of character. . . . In the comparatively small but genial circle of her friends, she appears to have inspired the deepest interest. In point of finish and figure, there is, indeed, location for critical remark as regards several of the selections in this volume; but we have no inclination to look with frigid curiosity upon a garland woven for the tomb.

. . . these “Poetical Remains” of the young and the early-called, will endear her memory and hallow her name.

Like the Davidsons and like amateur women poets to come, including Emily Dickinson, Lucy Hooper’s life is marked by seclusion and the respect of a small social sphere; her poetry is flawed but should not be criticized; and the collection of remains enshrines her writing and her memory.

Many of the characteristics of young women authors noted by their memoirists in literary remains also applied to older women. Mary Elizabeth Lee, a South Carolinian poet, died at age thirty-six after a long illness and some success publishing in periodicals and gift books. Her memoirist, the prominent Unitarian Samuel Gilman, explains that she was not only
a precocious reader as a child, seemingly moved by an innate force, but also possessed a remarkable ability as early as about age five, to read twenty pages of a book and then repeat them from memory, much as Margaret Davidson could inexplicably speak in verse as a young child. Like the literary remains of Brainard, which, for the sake of comprehensiveness included weak pieces that served as a “foil to the exceeding beauty of the others,” or the less mature writings of the Davidson sisters that were included, in spite of their weakness, to demonstrate the girls’ poetic development, Gilman explains that “what might seem a rather indiscriminate compilation here of her remains” are intended to demonstrate her poetic maturation. As a genre, literary remains were meant to collect in a way that would seem comprehensive the intellectual labor of the author for family and friends—with, perhaps, the possibility of attracting wider attention—and to chart and preserve the development of the artistic mind. Coupled with biographical sketches that often included unlikely claims about precocity and innate talent, the volumes repeatedly asserted the biographical framework as the best way of understanding not only individual poems, but also creativity.

The genre was a particularly appealing way for loved ones to memorialize the work of unmarried women who seemed from a nineteenth-century perspective to have not left behind the legacy typical for women. In the culture of modesty that shaped the expectations of women authors toward their work, teaching them, as Wolosky puts it, that modesty has “traditionally defined the quintessence of womanhood,” a posthumous collection was a fitting reward for years of patient, unrecognized effort, and it seems reasonable to speculate that some sickly, unmarried girls and women who strongly identified as creative might have anticipated such posthumous publication. When women did pursue publication of their work, in the context of the literary remains their ambition was wrenched into a narrative that overlaid the feminine virtue of modesty, even when it fit awkwardly. Gilman writes of Lee, for example, “She shrank, almost morbidly, from personal distinction and notoriety, even while seeming to affect them by the willing publication of her compositions.”

3. “MISS EMILY WROTE VERSES, AS OTHER MAIDEN LADIES DO”

It was in this context that Emily Dickinson’s first volume of poetry, titled simply Poems, was published and received in 1890. After Dickinson’s death
in 1886, her sister, Lavinia, had approached their brother Austin's wife, Susan, to compile a volume of Dickinson's poetry. Susan agreed, but accomplished nothing toward the project over the following three years. Lavinia became deeply frustrated by Susan's inaction, and retrieved the poetry manuscripts from her in order to give them to Mabel Loomis Todd for editing. Todd set to work on the manuscripts without Susan Dickinson's knowledge. Todd, who possibly hoped to ingratiate herself to Lavinia and Austin, found Lavinia's desperation compelling—she hesitated at first because she knew transcribing the poems would take years, but Lavinia persisted, and Todd gave in. At that time, while Emily Dickinson had many admirers among her friends and family, Lavinia was alone in her stalwart belief in Dickinson's genius and potential for literary success—a firmness that was viewed as unsophisticated and naive, even by her family and first editors. For instance, on the eve of the publication of *Poems*, Austin wrote to Higginson, “Whether it was, on the whole, advisable to publish is yet within me, a question, but my Sister Vin, whose knowledge of what is, or has been, outside of her dooryard is bounded by the number of her callers, who had no comprehension of her sister, yet believed her a shining genius, was determined to have some of her writing where it could be read of all men.” And so, up to the moment of publication, even those closest to Dickinson viewed the volume as somewhat of an indulgence, as a tribute to placate a loyal sister but certainly not a clear contribution to American letters that would thrive on its own merits.

As was standard for family and friends who were compiling a literary remains, Lavinia and Todd enlisted the participation of the most prominent connection the dead author had—in this case, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who, understanding his primary role to be lending his name to the obscure author's remains, declined to be actively involved in the early stages of editing. Todd was to do the lion's share of the work—transcribing almost a thousand poems, almost all of which were difficult to decipher; then sorting them into categories based on her opinion of their quality. Only then would Higginson become involved, by selecting from among those Todd favored and by helping to correct the poems for print.

From the beginning, like so many literary remains, Dickinson's volume seemed unlikely to succeed as a commercial venture. There was no likely publisher for the work, and most readers who read much of Dickinson's work found her poems marred by eccentricity, obscurity, and error. Todd knew it would take considerable work to see the poems into print, and ex-
pected the book to be released in very limited quantities. When first approached by Lavinia Dickinson, Todd recorded in her journal:

Having already had some experience with publishers, I told her that no one would attempt to read the poems in Emily’s own peculiar handwriting, much less judge them; that they would have to be copied, and then be passed upon like any other production, from the commercial standpoint of the publishing business, and that certainly not less than a year must elapse before they could possibly be brought out.³⁸

Later, when Todd consulted Higginson about publishing the poems, they took for granted that the book would be published at some expense to the family, understanding their roles as the friends who were ushering an obscure dead woman’s poems into a volume of literary remains. Higginson wrote to Todd, “The plates will cost rather less than $1 per page & there can often be two poems on a page—rarely more than one,”³⁹ say $230 for 250 pp. including 300 poems. Would that satisfy Miss Lavinia?”

Todd transcribed the poems for a few hours a day from November 1887 to late in 1889.⁴⁰ In November of 1889 she sent a large selection of transcriptions to Higginson, classified into three groups according to quality. From these, Higginson selected 199 (mostly from Todd’s “A” list, plus a few from her “B” list that Higginson favored). Although this final selection represented merely a fraction of Dickinson’s prodigious output, the title Poems was ambiguous, leaving it unclear whether the volume was a selection or as comprehensive as most literary remains. Higginson and Todd were then ready to shop the poems to a publisher. Wanting to give a large publishing house a shot, Higginson took the poems to Houghton Mifflin, for whom he was a reader. Unsurprisingly, when offered a volume of literary remains by yet another amateur woman poet, Houghton Mifflin flatly refused, saying, as Todd’s daughter Millicent Todd Bingham put it, that the poems “were much too queer—the rhymes were all wrong. They thought that Higginson must be losing his mind to recommend such stuff” (51). The editors decided, then, that Todd should approach Thomas Niles⁴¹ of Roberts Brothers, who had published one of Dickinson’s poems during her life in A Masque of Poets (1878), an anonymous collection that was part of Niles’s No-Name Series.⁴²

Niles was squeamish about the venture, claiming that “it would be unwise to perpetuate Miss Dickinson’s poems. They are quite as remarkable for defects as for beauties and are generally devoid of true poetical
qualities.” At first he offered to print a limited, cheap, hectograph edition of the poems at Roberts Brothers’ cost, but Todd’s husband insisted that the book should be done right if done at all. Niles next sent the poems to Arlo Bates, a reader for Roberts Brothers, who agreed that the poems should be printed, but in a drastically reduced number and only with corrections. Echoing critics of other literary remains, Bates claimed that Dickinson failed to quite reach “that indefinable quality which we call genius” and that she was so hampered by a lack of proper training that “constantly one is impelled to wonder and to pity at the same time.” And there were just too many of them, he thought, just as critics of other dead, mostly women, amateurs had complained. Dickinson’s poems suffered from bounteousness: “the work of exclusion,” Bates explained, “has not been pushed far enough.” Niles considered Bates’s advice, the poems were further pruned, and he agreed to print a limited edition with no royalties if Lavinia would buy the plates. These facts are often offered as evidence of yet another editor’s or critic’s lack of prescience regarding Dickinson’s writing. While Niles certainly cannot be commended for a visionary advocacy of Dickinson’s poems (though, to be fair, he was quite encouraging of Dickinson in their correspondence during her life), his ambivalence toward the volume, especially given his earlier encouragement of her, probably came from his sense as a publisher that they would be yet one more volume of a dead, amateur woman’s remains in a literary market where such volumes were unprofitable.

By the time Dickinson’s first editors were working on her posthumous volume, literary remains had become so common a means of memorializing the dead that a distinction had emerged between those authors distinguished enough to warrant placing their remains before the public and those for whom the volumes seemed to be pitiful homages to amateurism. For instance, after the assassination of James Garfield, the public hungered for his literary remains, so much so that a family friend contacted newspapers to “warn volunteer authors off the ground” to prevent an unofficial volume. When Garfield’s widow appointed B. A. Hinsdale, president of Hiram College, as the official editor of her husband’s remains, he felt it necessary to inform the public to keep their distance. “Mrs. Garfield has appointed me the editor of General Garfield’s works, with instructions to collect, edit, and carry them through the process as speedily as is consistent with completeness and thoroughness,” he explained, adding, “reputable publishers are disposed to respect her wishes, and not take hold of unauthorized
For public figures, the problem with literary remains was the threat of a comprehensiveness that may lack discretion. In 1891, a writer for the *Independent* complained, “It is fast becoming a very dangerous thing for a literary man to die. Certainly it is a very indiscreet thing,” eventually arguing for the necessity of a “society for the ‘Prevention of Posthumous Cruelty to Authors.’”

For amateur authors, who were frequently women, posthumous memorial collections were viewed quite differently. A piece in the *Philobiblion* from 1862 derided “the painful labors of the bibliographer, because they rescue from a merited oblivion the useless works of insignificant authors.” Such sentiment persisted for decades, and in 1915, when “literary remains” was still used to describe posthumous collections, an article in *Life* complained, “it is not for nothing that ‘literary remains’ has acquired a gruesome sound in our ears. Nor that, as between Hamlet’s ‘The rest is silence’ and an installment-plan immortality of rejected manuscripts, we have learned to prefer the former.” While most volumes of literary remains likely escaped critical notice altogether, being too inconsequential and narrowly distributed to attract attention, even the more successful efforts memorializing women authors sometimes attracted critical disdain. For instance, while Margaret Miller Davidson’s literary remains achieved remarkable success, some readers nevertheless saw the volume as another example of the excessive collection of the amateurish efforts of female authors. When the editor of the *Daily National Intelligencer* reviewed the work, he seized the opportunity to decry such volumes as the harbinger of the downfall of the United States. After telling the myth of the Sibyl who burned three-fourths of her writings so that King Tarquin, “no great admirer of female authorship,” would finally pay for her work, he explains in a way that Arlo Bates would echo in his later judgment of Dickinson, “This, we apprehend, is the reason why, since King Tarquin’s time, female compositions of high merit have been rare. Nobody has dealt with the sex as he did, and compelled them largely to submit their works to the ordeal of the flames.” Clarifying that women, in particular, are unqualified to write good poetry, he writes, “It may, in short, be stated as a literary law, that poetry, the most difficult of all the arts, and asking the highest union of genius with cultivation, is not to be written unless the mind has risen to its manliest growth.” For him, the generally positive critical reception of Davidson’s poetry is evidence of a degradation in literary taste that has set the country on a slippery slope toward moral ruin:
When taste and sense have come to such a pass that child-poetry, the productions of a rhyme-stricken girl scarcely in her teens, can be celebrated in critical journals, can catch a general admiration, and can even, by a formal biography and panegyric, receive the literary stamp of the writer of the country whose reputation is the widest and justest, it is a deplorable sign of the weakness, the fatuity in which literature is sunk.

. . . Such is the condition of things towards which our own country now exhibits too strong a tendency. The causes which best bring about the downfall of good government must act as speedily upon sound literature.

Although Davidson died decades before Dickinson, her posthumous popularity made her a prototype for the unmarried, melancholic, dead genius poetess. It was arguably Davidson whom Twain had in mind when he created the character of Emmeline Grangeford in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, published less than two years before Dickinson died.

Emmeline’s character parodied what had become a type by the 1880s: the prodigal, morbid poetess who was respected more—perhaps too much—after death than during life. “If Emmeline Grangerford could make poetry like that before she was fourteen, there ain’t no telling what she could a done by and by. Buck said she could rattle off poetry like nothing. She didn’t ever have to stop to think. He said she would slap down a line, and if she couldn’t find anything to rhyme with it would just scratch it out and slap down another one, and go ahead. She warn’t particular; she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about just so it was sadful.” Like Davidson and amateur female poets who followed her well-known pattern, melancholic Emmeline could speak in verse. He continues, “she kinder pined away and did not live long. Poor thing, many’s the time I made myself go up to the little room that used to be hers and get out her poor old scrap-book and read in it when her pictures had been aggravating me and I had soured on her a little. . . . Emmeline made poetry about all the dead people when she was alive, and it didn’t seem right that there warn’t nobody to make some about her now she was gone; so I tried to sweat out a verse or two myself, but I couldn’t seem to make it go somehow.” When Huck was tired of looking at Emmeline’s art in the parlor, her posthumous collection of verse made him favor her again, but because he is a wholesome, homespun boy, he can’t produce the rarified, feminized verse of the melancholic girl poet.

When Roberts Brothers declined to shoulder the expense of Dickin-
son’s posthumous *Poems*, despite Niles having encouraged her in life, it was likely because they recognized the volume as one of a type, and as quite a different venture than a volume of her poems published during her life might have been, when Niles might have worked with her, and when the volume would be received as a living, responsive author’s foray into the literary marketplace, rather than another memorial volume to dead, modest, amateur genius. Higginson and Todd seemed likewise aware of the context in which they were publishing the book. Not only were they willing to have the family pay for the plates, they printed prominently on the title page:

*Poems*

**By Emily Dickinson**

**Edited by Two of Her Friends**

Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson

As with other literary remains, the personal relationship between the deceased and the editors is emphasized. In his preface, Higginson explains that the volume “is published to meet the desire of her personal friends, and especially of her surviving sister.” Just as the editors of other dead women amateurs emphasized their modesty and reclusion, as if to heighten the unassumingness of the poems and shield them, and by extension, their author from public criticism, Higginson stresses the same virtues in Dickinson’s life and poetry. The poems were “produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer’s own mind.” “She must write thus, or not at all,” he explains of her unconventional verse. “A recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep . . . she habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends; and it was with great difficulty that she was persuaded to print, during her lifetime, three or four poems.” To an unsuspecting reader in 1890, the volume must have appeared to belong to the genre of literary remains. Only the power of the poems within propelled them past the fate of so many similar volumes.

Though modern scholars have generally failed to understand the book as such, Dickinson’s *Poems* was received as a volume of literary remains, albeit a rare one that—to many but not all critics—commanded a wider readership. Andrew Lang, writing for the London *Speaker*, was mercenary in his disgust for Dickinson, and referred to the volume as a “remains.”
Many critics understood the volume to have been, like most other literary remains, a privately published posthumous book that only through the fluke of authorial genius found a wider audience. A reviewer for the *Boston Journal* wrote, “the verses were produced by a recluse without the thought of publication, and are issued now after her death to meet the desire of her sister and personal friends. Such a volume has more the character of a private edition than of one published for criticism and public inspection.” Others expressed a similar understanding of the book. Louise Chandler Moulton wrote for the *Boston Sunday Herald*, “her surviving sister rescued these poems . . . from the destruction that so often awaits the papers of the dead; and it is due to the wishes of this sister and a few near friends that this present volume has been given to the public.”

Many of the reviewers assumed the book, like other volumes of its kind, would never reach a wide audience. “It is the special and serious revelation of a soul apart. . . . That it should have a large public is not to be expected,” wrote Charles Goodrich Whiting for the *Springfield Republican*. Another offered a backhanded compliment: “The posthumous Poems of Emily Dickinson . . . will give pleasure to the limited circle for whom they are designed.” Others were surprised when the volume gained traction beyond a limited sphere: “It is seldom that an author who gave to the world so little during her life wins such instant and hearty recognition by her posthumous work.”

Understanding a book as literary remains, or even simply reading it as a posthumous work, invites readers to understand the text in a particularly biographical context. In the nineteenth-century United States, marketing a volume as a posthumous work typically positioned readers to interpret it as a fruition of a life, as the reflection not of a limited effort but of an entire mind. The book is not offered as an agent’s foray into the market, but as a standing memorial, a record of the inner life, a salvo that cannot be answered. Works by living authors could bear a dialogic relationship to criticism, with critic and author understanding that each is able to influence the other, but posthumous volumes were understood by readers as a one-way communication, in many cases leaving them to interpret the work as an enigmatic reflection of the author’s life and mind. The reader “interprets her life by her verse and her verse by her life,” wrote an anonymous reviewer for the *Atlantic*. Dickinson’s Poems is “the outcome of the genius of an accomplished woman,” as one of the early reviewers put it, a “look into the soul of Emily Dickinson,” according to another. Throughout the first
reviews of Dickinson critics felt obliged to read the work as evidence for or against the value of her life and genius in toto.

The holistic biographical gaze that readers brought to Poems led many of them to accentuate biographical facts or amplify aspects of her life that made her fit more squarely with the stereotype of the dead amateur woman poet. A focus on her reclusion was endemic to the early reviews, with some insisting that she was an invalid, and many describing her as childlike, as if to better resemble the typical author of such volumes.56 “In her blameless seclusion Miss Emily wrote verses, as other maiden ladies do. They are mostly very bad verses,” wrote an unimpressed Lang, infantilizing her by using her first name, and placing her squarely in a tradition of modest, amateur, unmarried women and girls. Her poems “show the insight of the civilized adult combined with the simplicity of the savage child,” wrote Arlo Bates.57 To others she was “like an unmated child”58 or “one of the oddest children of literature.”59 A reviewer for the Philadelphia Press not only describes Dickinson as an invalid, but also asserts that she died at age thirty-six, a full twenty years younger than she was. Dickinson’s life made more sense to readers when it could be viewed as the kind that normally produced literary remains.

This biographical framing also invited readers to view literary remains teleologically, as a fitting end to the lives they memorialized. Literary remains were the final expression of an examined and concealed life that sometimes came at the expense of health and longevity, and the reward for a life of unassuming feminine modesty, giving the cloistered or quarantined woman a voice, turning her unrecognized labors into property, and protecting her with a shield of decency that guarded against harsh criticism. In Dickinson’s case, a reviewer explained, “She lived the life of a recluse, and wrote the poems now collected in a volume as the expression, and, perhaps, the solace, of her intense individuality.”60 Another reviewer, reflecting on the bittersweet nature of the posthumous reward, noted to readers “who have not yet made the acquaintance of this gifted woman in her remarkable book,” “This is sudden fame, but it was won by years of silent and secluded work, and unless those who die have knowledge how ‘their works do follow them,’ she does not know that it has come and heaped its laurel on her grave.”61 Yet another critic relished the thought of the collection as a denouement to her life of deprivation, writing, “How little did this gentle hermit dream that her musings might some day fulfill her desire.”62

When Higginson and Todd released the second series of Poems the very
next year, Todd seemed genuinely surprised by the first volume’s success, writing that the first volume “has found a response as wide and sympathetic as it has been unexpected even to those who knew best her compelling power.” The titling of the first volume as simply *Poems*—ambiguous in indicating whether the selection was comprehensive or representative—allowed the editors to build on the first volume by releasing the “second series” and “third series,” printed in matching format and similar binding, as if they were installments in a planned set, transforming with each edition the literary remains into a multivolume set more suited to a poet of her sudden stature. Although their efforts would be viewed decades later as egregiously unprofessional, presumptuous, and in need of dire remedy as modernists and New Critics required texts edited according to the ethos of the twentieth century, Todd’s and Higginson’s efforts were rooted in the long tradition of reading women’s posthumous writings, and provided to readers a gendered context for understanding them that may have been crucial to their success: the reward of a modest life.