Manuscript Witnesses & Transcriptions in Time

The construction of the Dickinson timeline included here requires some immediate explanations of its methods and how it can both question and reveal. In addition to providing depth—thickness—to the time of Dickinson’s writing ca. spring 1858 to ca. summer 1861, the timeline aims to foreground the varying levels of certainty as well as the essential uncertainty at the heart of dating Dickinson’s manuscripts and thereby unsettle the critical over-interpretations of evidence that characterize the artful reconstruction of Dickinson’s work and life.

Taking as my point of departure the dates of Dickinson’s writings provided in Johnson’s Letters (1958) and Franklin’s Poems (1998), I have sought to distinguish more clearly among works that can be dated with a high degree of certainty, those that are datable with a reasonable degree of certainty, and those whose dating remains conjectural.

• Only writings with extant material witnesses and verifiable corroborating internal evidence of their compositional date are considered datable with a high degree of certainty.
• Writings associated with extant material witnesses are considered datable with a reasonable degree of certainty, though necessarily with a greater margin of error. The “Master” documents fall into this category.
• The dating of all writings for which no material witnesses survive and in which the internal evidence is insufficient to confirm a clear date is considered conjectural.

Most often, the dates Johnson and Franklin assigned to Dickinson’s writings are to months or seasons, sometimes to periods within a year (e.g., first half of 1860, the second half of 1860), and occasionally only generally to a calendar year. On the timeline, writings dated only to a given year

121 Here the dating of Dickinson’s writings generally follows that proposed in Franklin’s Poems (1998) and Johnson’s Letters (1958). In the course of preparing his Poems, Franklin revised the dates of a number of Dickinson’s letters, and these revised dates are incorporated here. In My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson (2001), Alfred Habegger proposed several additional key revisions to the dating of Dickinson’s letters to Samuel and Mary Bowles, and his revisions are also noted here. Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Neil Smith approach the challenge of dating Dickinson’s writings to Susan Dickinson more circumspectly in their edition Open Me Carefully (1998), often assigning date ranges, rather than single dates, to these writings; these “areas of time” are included in the notes to the present timeline. Given their long years of intimacy with these documents, their reservations about identifying precise dates must be taken seriously. Cristanne Miller’s Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them (2016) proved a valuable resource for potential fascicle copying dates. Finally, the forthcoming edition of letters edited by Cristanne Miller and Domhnall Mitchell will almost certainly offer further important revisions to the dating of Dickinson’s writings.

122 The criteria for datability proposed by H. Wayne Storey and Isabella Magni in their construction of a digital timeline for Petrarch’s Fragmenta have been formative in my thinking about the timeline offered here. Magni’s observation, moreover, that “between the categories of ‘the dated’ […] and ‘the conjectured’ […] the more difficult area of ‘the datable’ raises methodological questions as to what might constitute this potentially wide-ranging definition” is as true of the dating of Dickinson’s writings as of Petrarch’s; see “The Timeline” in “Instructions” at http://dcl.sis.indiana.edu/petrarchive/. See also Isabella Magni, “The Fragmenta’s Timeline: Models for Reconstructing and Interpreting the Text”, in Authority and Materiality in the Italian Songbook: From the Medieval Lyric to the Early-Modern Madrigal, ed. Olivia Holmes and Paul Schleuse, special issue, Mediaevalia 39 (2018): 319–43.
appear in a footnote at the beginning of the line for that year; works dated to "early in the year" and the "first half of the year" appear in the winter of the designated year, though they may belong in the following spring; works dated the "second half of the year" are placed in summer of the designated year, though they may belong to later months in the autumn or early winter; and works dated to "late in the year" appear in the autumn/early winter of the designated year.

The dates Johnson and Franklin assigned to Dickinson's manuscripts often identify the date of a work's transcription, rather than the date of its drafting. The almost complete absence of working drafts for the poems copied and generally bound between ca. 1858 and ca. 1861, moreover, makes it especially difficult to mark with certainty the composition dates of work falling in this period. How temporally near, or far, working and fair copies of these writings stand to each other cannot be known and is not represented on the timeline. It is likely that the poems Dickinson transcribed and bound in the earliest fascicles belong to a wide range of years before 1858, including the anomaly year of 1857, to which no extant documents have been assigned. By 1859 or 1860, at which point we may more safely assume that Dickinson's storehouse of early poems had been largely cleared, drafts and fair copies may stand in closer proximity.

At least one critical set of dates is missing from this timeline of Dickinson's writings ca. spring 1858 to ca. summer 1861: the dates indicating the moment of Dickinson's discarding of particular working drafts, or groups of drafts, will probably forever remain unknown. How long did the working drafts of a given poem typically remain among Dickinson's papers? What conditions precipitated their destruction? Although the timeline cannot answer these questions, it may raise them in a more restricted and documentable context.

Finally, along the timeline, Dickinson's writings are divided into two broad groups: "Writings in prose and/or verse sent out to known and unknown correspondents" and "Writings in prose and/or verse retained in Dickinson's private archive". By classifying surviving documents in this way, I seek to call attention to the distinction between documents definitely circulated by Dickinson and those works or versions of works apparently withheld from circulation.\textsuperscript{123} Writings sent to correspondents outside the Homestead are arranged alphabetically by recipient; writings stored in Dickinson's private archive are arranged in the following order: single works in prose and/or verse composed on leaves never bound into larger gatherings are listed first, followed by verse works copied on sheets later bound into fascicles. Notes on possible binding dates for fascicles are also given. These orderings of documents along the timeline are editorial and do not reflect the unrecoverable authorial order of Dickinson's archive.

\textbf{Timeline Key}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Verified timeframe
  \item Probable timeframe
  \item Conjectural timeframe
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Blue text}

\textit{Writings in prose and/or verse sent out to known and unknown correspondents}

\textbf{Red text}

\textit{Writings in prose and/or verse retained in Dickinson's private archive}

\textbf{Green text}

\textit{Historic national events}

\textsuperscript{123} While it is possible, even likely, that some manuscripts circulated by Dickinson did not survive, thus skewing the ratio of manuscripts circulated and manuscripts withheld from circulation, I nonetheless believe that these classifications are meaningful. The textual evidence we have both acknowledges the extent of Dickinson's deeply networked universe and her simultaneous cultivation of private (unshared) writing space.