Writing in Time

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Published by Amherst College Press

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Writing in Time: Emily Dickinson's Master Hours.

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These have been night words. And by the letter-poem’s end, night has fallen. When Dickinson turns over the second leaf of the bifolium, she does not fill the paper but writes only a few lines: “tell me, please to tell / me, soon as you are / well –” (58–60). There is no signature, only an empty space stretching out beyond these lines.

Has she decided, already, that the message will not be sent?

Whether Dickinson made another copy and sent the new version from her desk at the Homestead to an address somewhere in her world and, if so, whether a reply from this address came sometime later is not known.

We do know that Thomas Johnson long maintained that many other messages belonging to this constellation had at one time existed. Franklin tacitly agrees, writing in the introduction to his edition of the “Master” documents, “Although there is no evidence the letters were ever posted […] , they indicate a long relationship, geographically apart, in which correspondence would have been the primary means of communication. Dickinson did not write letters as a fictional genre, and these were surely part of a much larger correspondence yet unknown to us”.¹⁷²

In Johnson’s and Franklin’s narratives, it follows that in the spring of 1858, Dickinson sent a copy—perhaps a variant copy—of the draft known as A 827 to an unidentified recipient and waited for a reply that may or may not have come. The image of a woman waiting for a letter is so old it seems without origins, so ubiquitous it seems always already understood. In Franklin’s and Johnson’s narratives, Dickinson has given up the prerogative of power. She is no longer a figure of agency but rather of longing.

Johnson and Franklin never imagine that Dickinson has not sent copies (variants, versions) of the messages she also saves. In their narratives, the very act of writing turns Dickinson into the one who awaits a reply, who undergoes the affective experience of waiting we (women) know so well. Yet it is not the “letter” that leaves the Homestead but rather Dickinson who leaves the safety the Homestead represents by drafting it. As spring turns into summer, she takes up a new proximity to freedom, and she does not turn back. Instead of waiting for a reply between the springs of 1858 and 1860, when the next extant “Master” document appears, Dickinson copies (in some cases, writes) some 170 poems onto fascicle sheets and binds eight volumes of her work. The hour of A 827 is followed by a breach—of hours, days, even months and years—of correspondence, but not of writing.

**SECOND HOUR**

**The Hour of Ermine: A 825**

*Fold a tiny Courtier
In thine Ermine, Sir,*

**EMILY DICKINSON, from A 825**

In the “Master” constellation, this poem feels like an asterisk—a tiny, concentrated star or point of light—separating two tendentially more epistolary documents.

**Fig. 22. A 825, ca. summer–autumn 1860**

*Mute – thy Coronation –* appears to have been composed in the second half of 1860, not only at least two years after the first extant “Master” document, A 827, but also in the apparently empty interval between the end of summer in 1860 and the beginning of the new year. The time—the hour—is worth noting. As Franklin remarks, “Fascicles 5 through 8 occupied Dickinson steadily from

¹⁷² Franklin, introduction to Master Letters, p. 5.
the summer of 1859 until the summer of 1860. Then something halted her course: there were no fascicle sheets for the rest of the year.¹⁷³

Did Dickinson's work on the fascicles at times alternate with her work on this other experiment?

*Mute – thy Coronation* – was composed on a fragment of lightly ruled stationery folded vertically in half, perhaps to close or even cover the poem after its composition. While its eight iambic lines scan as two perfect quatrains, it is likely an intermediate draft, embodying the manuscript state between the initial composition of a poem and its potential transformation into a fair copy. The handwriting, with its high incidence of ligation and lack of flourish—the descendents of the y's and g's are wanting of their usual long left-sweeping curves—suggests both an accelerated speed of composition and a lack of care regarding its visual appearance. A 825 seems to have been meant for Dickinson's eyes only.

This document feels distant from A 827. The word horde from which Dickinson draws here is not that of the first extant "Master" document. In *Mute – thy Coronation* – the natural world evoked in the earlier epistolary document is replaced by the simulated world of pageant, even as spring greenness is superseded by the winter-white of ermine. The new constellation of images, the new series of associations apparently elevating the "Master" and reducing the speaker that coalesces in Dickinson's imagination in A 825 in the summer to autumn of 1860, persists into the late winter or spring of 1861, when she composes A 829, the third extant "Master" document. Perhaps this poem that never found its way into a fascicle or even a fair copy lay on or near Dickinson's desk, a material *promemoria*, when she turned once more to address the "Master" in A 829.

Both A 825 and A 829 proceed from the speaker's claim of "meekness" or "lowness", sharing this variant reading; both imagine an intimate yet invisible enfolding in the body or dress—"Ermine"—of the "Master"; both allude to a brokenness in the writer.

Here, though, is where the similarities between this 1860 composition, A 825, and the spring 1861 composition, A 829, seem to end, and still more striking differences surface. In A 825, Dickinson's speaker's thoughts are still arranged in quiet quatrains regulated by iambic highs and lows. When Dickinson speaks again, in this sequence constellation in 1861, her lines of prose register an intensely lived disturbance; her voice affronts us with its strangeness. Looking backward from the later prose draft, the poem inscribed on A 825 seems like a brief respite before Dickinson re-enters the trial of writing.

A small, even minor poem in the context of Dickinson's "Master" experiment, the larger significance of *Mute – thy Coronation* – lies in part in what it may illuminate about both the formal components of the "Master" constellation—namely, its inclusion of not only epistolary but also poetic forms—and the inter-generic nature of Dickinson's writing experiments between 1858 and 1861. While the fascicles embody the most sustained writing and transcriptional experiment of the years between ca. 1858 and ca. 1864, it seems likely that another, still more hermetic experiment expressed in the "Master" constellation unfolded alongside that of the early fascicles.

Yet this experiment is marked by not only a shifting between the epistolary and poetic but, still more profoundly, the presence of an unnamed interlocutor as a perfect dialogical foil, perhaps real but also certainly imagined, perhaps human but also beyond human and...
remote from the discourse addressed to him and sometimes to the more distant forms of “Thy” or “It”. The brevity of A 825, its status as a minor work, has led us to overlook it as the first site in which Dickinson crucially re-figures the “Master” as stranger, where the uncanny linking of intimacy and distance is quietly forged.

Coronation, pageant, courtier, ermine: these words are rare in Dickinson’s lexicon. From the net of the words that compose Mute – thy Coronation – another small constellation of poems from across Dickinson’s oeuvre emerges.174 Most are markedly hermetic, difficult to interpret. In them, pageant is almost invariably associated with departure and coronation with eternity; the courtiers appear as seekers, closer to those who wait at the gates of Paradise than those who attend at court; and ermine is as sumptuous as love or death. In one, Wert Thou but ill – that / I might show thee, composed for or at least copied in Fascicle 40 just before Dickinson exited the fascicle experiment forever, a clustering of images—of illness, trial, and sentencing, of the Stranger—seems to recall at least one, possibly more fragmentary lines of narrative from the “Master” project, also long since ended.175

The material condition of A 825, its existence as a small square of paper possibly folded to cover the text inscribed upon it, feels like part of its meaning. The most private and enigmatic of writings, the “Master” documents may structurally resemble prayers—vows or devotions—which, as the historian Michel de Certeau writes, “count on the expectation of the other. But [are] not sure of it.”176 And while the reference point for this experiment—the “Master”—appears only rarely as an unnamed yet singular address after 1861, the importance of the experiment continues to be felt in Dickinson’s conception of both poetry and letters as forms of communication depending not on reciprocity and symmetry but on the radical uncertainty of connection. In the “Master” documents, as in the work that follows, writing’s voice conveys both faith in the otherness that awaits it and a necessary accession to all that may, or may not, come.

THIRD HOUR

The Hour of Lead: A 829

tell her
her offence fault – Master –
if it is not so small
one to cancel with
her life

EMILY DICKINSON, from A 829

Where—and by what forces—is Dickinson carried from the solicitude of A 827 and the humility of A 825, the first two extant documents in the “Master” constellation, to the trial of the third, A 829? How do we measure the distance between these documents?

In A 829, the restrained longing and the quiet reclamation of the beauty and strangeness that once approached her in spring and poetry, love and pain, are gone, deposed by a paroxysmal rage.177 Bearing neither salutation nor signature, A 829 does not unfold as part of a sequence but survives instead as the record of a rupture. Whatever has

174 For poems including the word pageant, see “All these my banners be” (Fr 29); “Inconceivably solemn!” (Fr 414); “Some such Butterfly be seen” (Fr 661); “The harm of Years is on him –” (Fr 1215); “Death is the supple Suitor” (Fr 1470); “One of the ones that Midas touched” (Fr 1488); and “Pompless no Life can pass away –” (Fr 1594). For poems including the word courtiers, see “Taken from men – this morning” (Fr 34); “She bore it till the simple veins” (Fr 81); “In rags mysterious as these” (Fr 102); and “Wait till the Majesty of Death” (Fr 169). For poems including the word corona, see “The Day that I was crowned” (Fr 613); “Smiling back from Coronation” (Fr 651); and “One crown that no one seeks” (Fr 1759). And for poems containing the word ermine, see “The Guest is gold and crimson” (Fr 44); “One dignity delays for all –” (Fr 77); “In rags mysterious as these” (Fr 102); “I met a King this Afternoon!” (Fr 183); “No matter – now – Sweet –” (Fr 734); and “Wert Thou but ill – that I might show thee” (Fr 821).

175 Although perhaps philologically perilous, it is interesting to read this later poem, composed (or copied) around early 1864, next to the earlier possible “Master” poem “Again – his voice is at / the door” – (A 89-8/9), composed about early 1862 and never bound. If these poems—so full of doors, thresholds, openings—do remember the “Master” experiment, they do so in a more oblique way, encrypting the very address they seek.