In 1861, variant readings begin to appear with some frequency, undermining the idea of the single, finished poem and engaging the aesthetics of “choosing not choosing” that will be central to her poetics for the remainder of her writing life. It does not feel coincidental that Dickinson’s long farewell to the “Master” and her leave-taking of the textual authorities she once imagined might place their imprimatur on her poems occur simultaneously. Not fully legible, and never exhausted by our readings of it, A 829 foretells the end of the teleological phase of the fascicle project even as it conveys a warning about the breakdown of the world. In its audible intensity, A 829 is more voice than text, a series of displaced enunciations that re-define the territories of poetic language and the registers of the written voice at once.

Instead of interpreters, Dickinson’s draft turns us into witnesses.

**FOURTH HOUR**

*The Midnight Hour: A 826*

*Then – Midnight – I have passed\nfrom thee –*  

**EMILY DICKINSON, from A 826**

In the “Master” constellation, verse may still operate as closure, a check against the roaming, centrifugal casting out of thought found in the longer trials of genre at the constellation’s core. Less anarchic in appearance than the draft that precedes it, A 826, *A wife – at Daybreak / I shall be* – may be an initial attempt to resolve the psychic disorder sounded in the fractured voices of the earlier document by bringing the speaker back within the bounds of the social order. In A 826, the series of thresholds that structure the poem are linked to an itinerary designed to effect her translation from “maid” to “wife”, and the speaker’s step-by-step movement seems at first so locked into the poem’s metrical unfolding as to make deviation from the course seem impossible.

Yet at “Midnight”, the speaker reports crossing over a boundary and also “pass[ing] from thee” (8–9), a referent so ambiguous that we may imagine she has passed not only through the apex of the darkness but also through the wide arms of the “Master”. The marriage day alluded to in the poem’s opening lines does not break at its end, where, in place of the time-bound condition of “wife”, a “face” she has seen before, the speaker summons a vision of eternity.

The mechanical, culturally inscribed fantasy collapses.

Associated with the “Master” constellation, *A wife – at Daybreak* permits us a new and potentially recontextualized reading of A 829, hinting that the origins of the speaker’s wound may be traceable not to the “Master” rejecting her but to her choosing a life outside the conventions that structure his/Its own. The anguished, bitter outcry with which A 829 opens—“Oh ’did I offend it – / Didn’t it want me / to tell it the truth,” (1–3)—convicts her, not him, of a first and violent infraction against love’s social order.

A poem’s meaning does not derive only from the reproduction of its words but also from its meshwork of relationships with history, time, and place. In the spring of 1861, when Dickinson drafts A 826, she is drafting a private poem, and the 1861 *A wife – at Daybreak* (A 826) remains in its draft (un)dress: it does not enter the fascicles; it does not circulate beyond Dickinson’s work space. Indeed, a full year must pass before Dickinson returns to the poem and makes a fair copy, and then yet another year passes before she makes a third copy and binds it into Fascicle 32. Each of the two subsequent copies (1862, 1863) is a variant version of the first draft of 1861; each marks its distance from A 826 and the “Master” experiment. The 1862 manuscript (A 116) is composed in ink on two leaves of stationery. Neither folded nor addressed, it does not seem to have been prepared for sending. Nor was it prepared for binding, since in copying the poem Dickinson wrote only on the
recto of the first and second leaves, separating them with a blank verso, a situation that would have created a unique and awkwardly unusable leaf in a fascicle.

But perhaps the most significant change between A 826 and A 116 is not material but textual: in A 116 there is an exchange of bodies: “Master” is replaced by “Savior,” at once an elevation but also a reduction—diminution—of the panoramic connotations of “Master”. While, like A 826, A 116 remains among Dickinson’s papers, it no longer summons, and it is no longer reserved for a particular subject, but through this change of address, it is instead re-directed away from the “Master” experiment and away, too, from the intimate inscription of vulnerability and contingency that are its conditions.

The haunting intertextual relations among the poems that share the same fascicle sheet—itself the final sheet in Fascicle 32—are difficult to interpret. The first two, A Wife – at Daybreak – and Why make it doubt – it, on the recto and verso of the first leaf of the sheet, address the “Master” directly in their concluding lines: “Master – I’ve seen the Face – before –”; “Oh ‘ Master ’ This is Misery –”. In the latter two, I live with Him – I see / His face – and The power to be true to You, the address is implicit in the poems’ intimacy. Like the earlier “Master” documents, none of these poems seem ever to have circulated beyond the fascicle, and although all four are fully resolved, they feel veiled and inaccessible. In the context of Fascicle 32, this last sheet contains a doubly operative set of texts, both self-contained on the folded sheet and self-sealing for the fascicle, both closing and re-opening the “Master” experiment of ca. 1858 to ca. 1861.

Although A wife – at Daybreak is the only “Master” document that exists in multiple manuscripts and that claims a textual home both inside and outside the fascicles, it complicates our understanding of the boundaries of this constellation and the larger boundaries of Dickinson’s works.

The singular nature and significance of A 826 is only underscored by the presence of additional manuscripts carrying variant texts with variant histories. Whatever the nature of Dickinson’s unrecoverable intentions, the length of time the text inscribed on this document remained outside the fascicles suggests that she was ambivalent about committing it to the most durable record of her work. Yet in violation of her usual practice in the 1850s and 1860s of destroying draft copies after entering record copies in the fascicles, Dickinson held onto A 826, as a memento, perhaps, or a link to the largely hidden events of spring 1861.

In this earlier spring, its closest associations are to A 829, the disordered draft it follows, and A 828, the final extant document in the “Master” constellation written just

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187 In Dickinson’s oeuvre, a single text is often represented by multiple manuscripts written around the same time or in different seasons and even years. In these cases, it is necessary to consider not only the ways in which textual variants between and among the manuscripts complicate issues of authorial intention and address but also how the different textual histories of individual manuscripts deepen such complications.
a few months after A 826. In this spring, as the light and temperatures are once again rising, so Dickinson’s internal conditions also seem to have been changing. From the depths of A 829, Dickinson emerged to draft the last two extant documents of the ca. 1858 to ca. 1861 “Master” constellation on sheets of laid, cream, blue-ruled stationery embossed with a decorative frame containing a queen’s head above the letter L. As the poet and scholar Susan Howe wrote in 1991, for Dickinson, “[t]he physical act of copying is a mysterious sensuous expression. […] She paid attention to the smallest physical details of the page. Embossed seals in the corner of recto and verso leaves are part of the fictitious real.”

The queen’s head is associated with a brief but significant period—and, perhaps even more significantly, with a series of events, a train of thinking, a moment when prose and verse were closer together than ever before or after. What new constellations of documents would come to light, what possible connections, associations, and resonances would materialize if we were to read all of the works composed on paper embossed with a queen’s head? In this spring-turning-into-summer, message, medium, chance, and authorial intention converge in a private, experimental poetics of infinite postponement.

FIFTH HOUR

The Queen’s Hour: A 828

if I wish
with a might I cannot
repress – that mine were the
Queen’s place – the love of
the – Plantagenet is my only
apology –

EMILY DICKINSON, from A 828

A 828 feels like an apotheosis. In A 828, Dickinson’s speaker returns from the hour of lead. To mark this return, Dickinson writes in a beautiful fair copy hand. A new adeptness is apparent in the negotiation of the epistolary dynamics of presence and absence: in A 828, Dickinson gives an account of the speaker’s experience of the intricate interweaving of gender, sexuality, autonomy, and dissent in a language that freely crosses genre boundaries and that needs no authorization from outside. While there are many material cruxes that lead us to question the precise nature of the “Master” documents’ connections to one another, there are also intimations—textual and philological—that ultimately affirm that the association is not arbitrary. The multiplicity of drives organizing the earlier epistolary, indeterminate, and verse texts converge here, and while nothing in these earlier texts can predict the extraordinary vision conjured in A 828, read in retrospect each may be seen as an auger of this final extant document. The speaker’s probing of the future is thus balanced by an engagement with the past manifest in her oblique retrieval of the language and imagery of all that has come before.

Indeed, although at least three years have elapsed between the first extant document in the constellation, A 827, and this last extant document, A 828, the images organizing the first missive—flowers, the Sabbath, sundown, and the sea—return, changed, in the last. In A 827, love is a sea on which the speaker drifts, “count[jing] / the Sabbaths, till we / meet on shore –” (46–48); in A 828, she asks the “Master” to remember the disturbing sensation of the sea coming “so close as / to make you dance” (82–83). In A 827, the speaker’s flowers whisper “what the / lips in the West, say, / when the sun goes / down” (36–39); in A 828, she


189 Although no full-scale study of Dickinson’s use of papers has been published, Dickinson’s use of papers in the fascicles as well as in certain correspondences suggest the need for a further investigation on the linkage of materials to the practice of authorship. Can we surmise that Dickinson kept separate paper stocks that she used “with purpose” until she ran out? Did she collect paper stocks that were similar for uniformity in appearance? See R.W. Franklin’s notes on paper types in the fascicles in The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 1407–12.