



# Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885

*Elizabeth A. Petrino*

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For many years, Emily Dickinson's cryptic verse was viewed as an isolated phenomenon, the poet herself an enigma whose motivations and influences were shrouded in mystery. Eschewing such stereotypes, Elizabeth A. Petrino places the Belle of Amherst within the context of other nineteenth-century women poets and examines the feminist implications of their work. Dickinson and contemporaries like Lydia Sigourney, Louisa May Alcott, and Helen Hunt Jackson developed in their writing a rhetoric of duplicity that enabled them to question conventional values but still maintain the propriety necessary to achieve publication. To demonstrate these strategies, Petrino examines both Dickinson's poetry and a range of "women's" genres, from the child elegy to the discourse of flowers. She also enlists contemporary magazines, unpublished professional correspondence, even gravestone inscriptions and posthumous paintings of children to explain what Petrino calls the most significant fact of Dickinson's literary biography, her decision not to publish. In the end, we see how, "these poets create a kind of cultural palimpsest, writing and rewriting central tropes about death, marriage and motherhood, and the power and function of consolatory verse, barely visible under the erasures of literary history. Set against a new and recently recovered tradition of female verse writing, Dickinson's central place in the canon and her position as a consummate artist are clearly affirmed."

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