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ENG 5009-001: Recovering Emily Dickinson

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Course description for English 5009 “Recovering Emily Dickinson”

Since their initial publication following her death, the poems of Emily Dickinson have been read and studied perhaps more intensely than the work of any other American writer. Each new year seems to bring yet another critical or biographical study of Dickinson's life and work from yet another new and surprising angle. Dickinson as gardener, Dickinson and servants, Dickinson and misery, Dickinson and the lyric, Dickinson as maker—these and many other topics spur both enthusiasm and often fierce debate among those interested in her. With equal regularity, works of fiction and poetry by other writers appear wearing Dickinson's influence proudly, while museums and cultural foundations organize exhibits centered on her achievement in American letters. Dickinson now also has an extensive digital presence, all of her manuscripts now available to anyone online, among other resources. From schoolkids to scholars, Emily Dickinson is mightily well known for someone who published only a small handful of poems in her lifetime and who was known well only by a very small group of people, if really known well by anyone at all.

So in what sense will we be “recovering Emily Dickinson” and how will we be going about that in this graduate seminar? The course will be centered principally on the poetry itself in the relatively new Franklin edition of her work. As a group, we will spend a great deal of our time reading Dickinson together, learning the various strategies her work requires. We will also as a group read Lyndall Gordon's fascinating *Lives Like Loaded Guns* (2011) one of the most interesting examples of contemporary Dickinson scholarship, which will help us both to understand Dickinson as a writer and also come to terms with the extremely complicated and at times downright melodramatic publishing history that has continued from the time of her death to the present day. We will also read some of the things that Dickinson herself read—in particular the work of Emily Bronte, whom Dickinson loved and admired—as well as some work by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, both of whom Dickinson was not so sure about. The Dickinson that we recover through this process I think will be one that will surprise everyone, a Dickinson perhaps quite a bit different than might be expected, and a Dickinson finally that deserves and warrants the sustained, deep scrutiny that she receives.

Along with the primary reading, each member of the class will be responsible for exploring and presenting in class one of the newer works of Dickinson scholarship, and also writing an end of the semester seminar paper.