

Mary Kuhn, “Dickinson and the Politics of Plant Sensibility.” *ELH* 85.1
(Spring 2018): 141-170.

Connections between Emily Dickinson and the botanical world are well established. Otis Allen Bullard’s 1840 painting, *Emily Elizabeth, Austin, and Lavinia*, for example, depicts nine-year-old Dickinson holding an open book with an elaborate floral illustration. Visitors to the Emily Dickinson Museum are impressed by both the striking rose wallpaper of her bedroom and the recently restored conservatory where Dickinson spent much of her adult life in vegetal and poetic pursuits alike. Her Amherst gardens were featured in a 2010 New York Botanical Garden Show subtitled “The Poetry of Flowers”, her childhood herbarium contains more than four hundred plant species, and her poems themselves reference flowers more than three hundred and fifty times.

Mary Kuhn’s essay offers an important new perspective on this familiar entanglement. Her focus on the transnational nature of nineteenth-century gardening practices resists the tendency to cite Dickinson’s flowers within the context of gendered domesticity. Similarly, her attention to the materiality of plant life itself challenges critical readings that figure Dickinson’s botanical references in the language of symbol and trope alone. Through thoughtful engagement with a wide range of literary, scientific, and theoretical scholarship, Kuhn contributes a renewed vision of Dickinson within her own time and a powerful suggestion of her relevance for contemporary ecological engagement.

The essay begins with a focus on “plant mobility”, drawing on a vast archive of seed and plant catalogues, nursery advertisements, and horticultural periodicals to demonstrate how nineteenth-century gardens and gardeners became increasingly enmeshed in “ecologically diverse networks of plant circulation” (143). Such catalogues afforded Dickinson the opportunity to cultivate botanical offerings from around the world; Kuhn’s analysis elucidates the many ways that these “strange, bright crowds of flowers” permeate her poems as well (150). She likewise notes Dickinson’s participation in private networks of plant exchange, citing her vast “number of plant specimens from Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia” traceable to “one or several of her friends who married Protestant missionaries and subsequently traveled abroad” (151-152).

Rather than critiquing these patterns of circulation as markers of colonial intrusion and imperial expansion, Kuhn locates within Dickinson’s floral invocations both a destabilizing transformation of geographical space and the sense of a dynamic, agential natural world. She frames the plant specimens received from abroad, not as inert adjuncts to the letters that contained them, but as integral parts of the communications themselves – an argument she pairs with Dickinson’s poetic declaration that “Between My Country – and the Others...Flowers – negotiate between us – As Ministry” (152). Moreover, she examines how Dickinson redirects the very notion of “plant mobility” itself away from passively transported seeds and pressings toward plants that seem to possess literal powers of independent movement – as in the case of her “little Arctic flower” that “Went wandering down the Latitudes” (150).

For Kuhn, Dickinson’s plants move in ways that highlight the uneven geographies of the global nineteenth century. Her 1856 epistolary declaration that “My flowers are near and foreign, and I have but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles”, for example,

“revises the idea of nature in place” – that is, as explicitly local – while revealing “Dickinson’s nature [as] dynamic in geopolitically significant ways” (153, 152). Such assertions prepare us for the second half of the essay and its turn to the concept of “plant sensibility”. Here, by emphasizing the imbrication of science and sentimentality that infused both nineteenth-century plant practices and broader theories of vitalism, Kuhn astutely explicates the “more radical possibility” that Dickinson’s poems engage animate matter – or “floral vitality” – with powerful ecological and political consequences (153). She then concisely traces the scientific tradition of plant feeling, as well as its prominence in popular journals and textbooks of the period, and highlights Dickinson’s engagements with both.

In turning to poems such as “Bloom – is Result – to meet a Flower” and “Flowers – Well – if anybody”, Kuhn again explores Dickinson’s conception of a flower “as a living entity in its own right . . . an agent in process” (158). This, she establishes, is not merely metaphor or pathetic fallacy; taken literally, “this sentimental connection challenges the notion that feeling is essentially a human characteristic” while simultaneously adhering to recognized understandings of botanical science (160). Thus, she concludes, “Dickinson’s sensible plants [refuse] . . . the rigid separation of human, animal, and plant that shaped nineteenth-century conceptions of personhood” – a gesture that “both undermines the human claim to distinction and points to affective environmental interaction as a necessity for political agency” (161, 164).

With attentions ranging from the scientific and the political to the aesthetic and the poetic, the merits of Kuhn’s essay are numerous. Its historical contextualization, archival breadth, and skillful close readings would make it an excellent teaching companion for Dickinson’s work at either the undergraduate or the graduate level – and its elevation of Dickinson’s bearing on “this era of imminent ecological crisis” is a valuable contribution to new materialist criticism, the history of science, and the study of nineteenth-century American poetry alike (165).

Joshua Bartlett
Bilkent University