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# 'Dying in Drama': Dickinson's Dramatic Lyrics

Páraic Finnerty\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Portsmouth – United Kingdom

## Abstract

This paper examines the role of performance in Dickinson's poetry by considering the influence on it of her education in rhetoric and declamation, on the one hand, and her engagement with the dramatic lyrics of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, on the other. Placing Dickinson's poetry in the context of the guidance on reading aloud in Richard Whately's 1834 *Elements of Rhetoric* and Ebenezer Porter's 1841 *The Rhetorical Reader* offers a new way of thinking about her construction of supposed persons whose lyric subjectivities are performed in the process of reading her poems. These works which Dickinson studied at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke suggest her awareness that oral performances necessitated a level of self-transcendence and an ability to identify and sympathize with the perspectives and experiences of others. An openness to the forging of social and emotional links with individuals different from one's self is also a central aspect of one of the most important poetic innovations of the nineteenth century: the dramatic lyric (later termed the dramatic monologue). Highlighting a connection between nineteenth-century pedagogy and the era's development and popularization of the dramatic lyric, many of her favourite poets produced dramatic lyrics, which blurred lines between the reading and performance of poetry, and shaped the ways in which Dickinson wrote her poems. This paper focuses on performance and voice in those poems spoken by figures who are dying or dead. Drawing attention to the differences and similarities between theatrical performances, tied to scenery, staging and acting, and oral ones, tied to language and how it is spoken, Dickinson's posthumous speakers show the poet pushing points of identification to the limit and drawing attention to the dramatic lyric as trick or feint.

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\*Speaker