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LARA LANGER COHEN

Emily Dickinson's Teenage Fanclub

This essay situates Emily Dickinson's poetry within a network whose demographic is often assumed to be most allergic to it: teenage boys. In November 1882, a version of "Success is counted sweetest" (Fr112) appeared in the *Amateur Journal* (Fig. 1), a homemade newspaper from Judsonia, Arkansas, edited by eighteen-year-old Albert E. Barker.¹ Dickinson almost certainly did not know of Barker's existence. Barker almost certainly did not know of hers. He likely reprinted "Success is counted sweetest" after reading it in *A Masque of Poets*, an anthology of anonymous poetry issued by the Boston publishers Roberts Brothers in 1878.² From this collection, which included love poems, comic poems, nautical poems, nature poems, war poems, and an ode to fishing, by authors later identified as James Russell Lowell, John Townsend Trowbridge, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, Bayard Taylor, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, among others, Barker chose Dickinson's elliptical tribute to the irradiating power of failure.

The appearance of "Success is counted sweetest" in the *Amateur Journal* adds a new entry to the list of venues in which Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime. Moreover, its triple publication—first in the April 27, 1864 issue of the *Brooklyn Daily Union*; then in *A Masque of Poets*; and then in the *Amateur Journal*—means that, ironically, "Success is counted sweetest" must be counted as one of Dickinson's most successful poems until her posthumous acclaim. Its initial success, though, came as a result of the fact that it circulated apart from its author. Rather than focusing on Dickinson, then, this essay analyzes how her readers situated "Success is counted sweetest" in their own contexts, asking what we can learn about an early United States youth subculture from the poem's reprinting in the *Amateur Journal*. By re-reading the poem within the world of postwar amateur

journalism, I consider how this early Dickinson poem helped adolescent boys more than two decades after its probable composition, and thousands of miles away, to understand their own networks.³

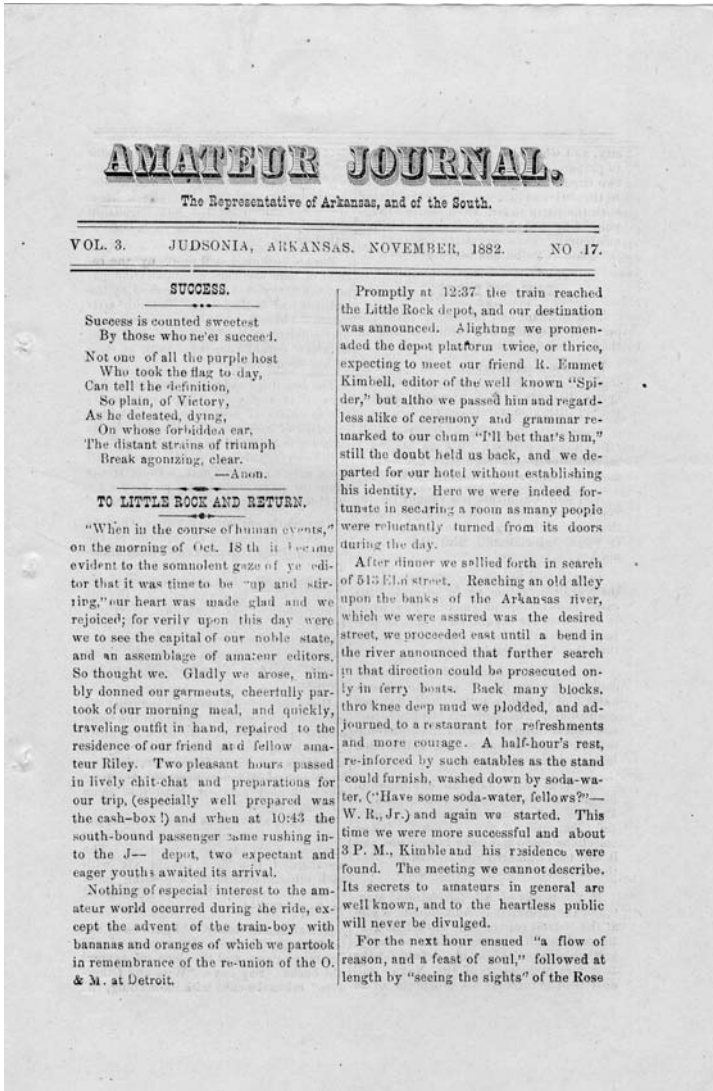


Fig. 1. *Amateur Journal* [Judsonia, AR], November 1882. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The amateur newspaper boom began in 1867 with the introduction of the Novelty Printing Press, a small treadle press marketed with the slogan, "Every boy his own printer!" Dozens of competitors soon followed, leading to an explosion of newspapers written, edited, and printed by teenage boys who identified themselves as "amateur journalists"; although a few girls participated, they would not enter amateurdom in large numbers until the late 1880s. The American Antiquarian Society, where I conducted my research on amateur journalism, has over 55,000 amateur newspapers from nearly every state in the union, and even their collection is far from complete. Papers ranged in size from quarto to pocket-sized, but their contents were fairly consistent. While the front pages would often feature a poem, a story, or didactic essay, the rest of the papers mostly revolved around amateurdom itself (or "the 'dom," as its members preferred to call it). They contained editorials on the state of amateur journalism; reviews of other newspapers; in-jokes aimed at fellow editors; reports from local, state, and national amateur conventions; histories of amateur journalism; profiles of prominent amateur editors; and gossip. In the early twentieth century, amateur journalism grew to include adults as well as adolescents, but in these first few decades it formed a uniquely teenage subculture.

Although the amateurs' formulaic newspapers can appear worlds away from Dickinson's famously idiosyncratic poetry, their conditions of production actually have much in common. They printed their newspapers themselves or sometimes through the services of other amateurs, practicing a form of self-publication akin to Dickinson's fascicles and letters. Like Dickinson, most distributed their writing through the mail. They tended to address intimate networks, as Dickinson often did. Amateurs wrote for other amateurs, and while some gamely offered general subscriptions, they primarily distributed their papers through exchange arrangements, in which editors regularly traded papers. A Missouri amateur described falling into a reverie of cross-continental communion while reading his exchanges:

[W]e imagine ourself in far-off Massachusetts—in Gardner—enjoying ourself amid the score of surrounding amateurs, and pleasantly participating in one of the Gardner Clubs' socials. Then, away we fly over the thousands of miles between old Massachusetts and the 'golden fields of California,' to a meeting of the California amateurs. We can see them, though mostly young, sincerely laboring, in their best manner, for the upbuilding of the cause [of amateurdom] in the West. O, how we long to mingle with them, give the benefit of our greater experience, and enter as sincerely into the work as they. . . . Then, away we go

again to New York—and the number of other places to which we sometimes allow ourself to roam, within our mind, is limited only by the number of places and amateurs constituting Amateurdom. (“Midnight Musings” 6-7)

Like a more lighthearted version of Dickinson’s “How News must feel when travelling” (Fr1379), the article’s author imagines circulating in place of the newspapers. Presswork, the ostensible object of amateurdom, dissolves into the affect it creates; newspapers disappear into “socials” and “ming[ling],” and the writer pictures his labor as emotional rather than physical—“sincere,” as he twice tells us. His fantasy recalls Dickinson’s tendency to blur the lines between the material forms of writing and human bodies: think of the wondrously living words of “A Word dropped careless on a Page” (Fr1268), “A word is dead, when it is said” (Fr278), or “A word made Flesh is seldom” (Fr1715). And just as amateurs imagined their papers bringing far-flung boys into immediate, affectionate proximity, so too did they mediate actual proximities through writing, much as Dickinson wrote letters to nearby neighbors. As soon as a town had a handful of amateurs, for example, they would print up a directory describing their papers to one another, often including physical and personal profiles of the editors.

In fact, Dickinson and the amateur journalists may share a literary genealogy. R. W. Franklin hypothesizes that Dickinson derived the idea for her fascicles from her days at Amherst Academy, where students issued a manuscript newspaper called “Forest Leaves” (9).⁴ These precursors to postbellum amateur journalism were something of a fad in mid-century schools. Although written in manuscript, they mimic the format of a newspaper with a masthead, columns, and headlines for each item. Most featured a combination of news, literature, and moral advice, as in the example below from the Millbury Academy, about 50 miles from Amherst (Figs. 2A and 2B). Folded pieces of paper covered in handwriting, manuscript newspapers like these resemble Dickinson’s own sheets of poems.⁵ Like the fascicles, they evoke printed forms (the newspaper, the book) while emphatically not duplicating them. While amateur journalists adopted Dickinson, it also seems that Dickinson herself had adopted some of the earliest forms of amateur journalism. The amateur journalists who read her work in *A Masque of Poets* could not have known they shared this antecedent, of course. Yet their common roots, like their similar conditions of production, might indicate a shared perspective that helps explain why Dickinson’s poetry resonated in amateurdom.

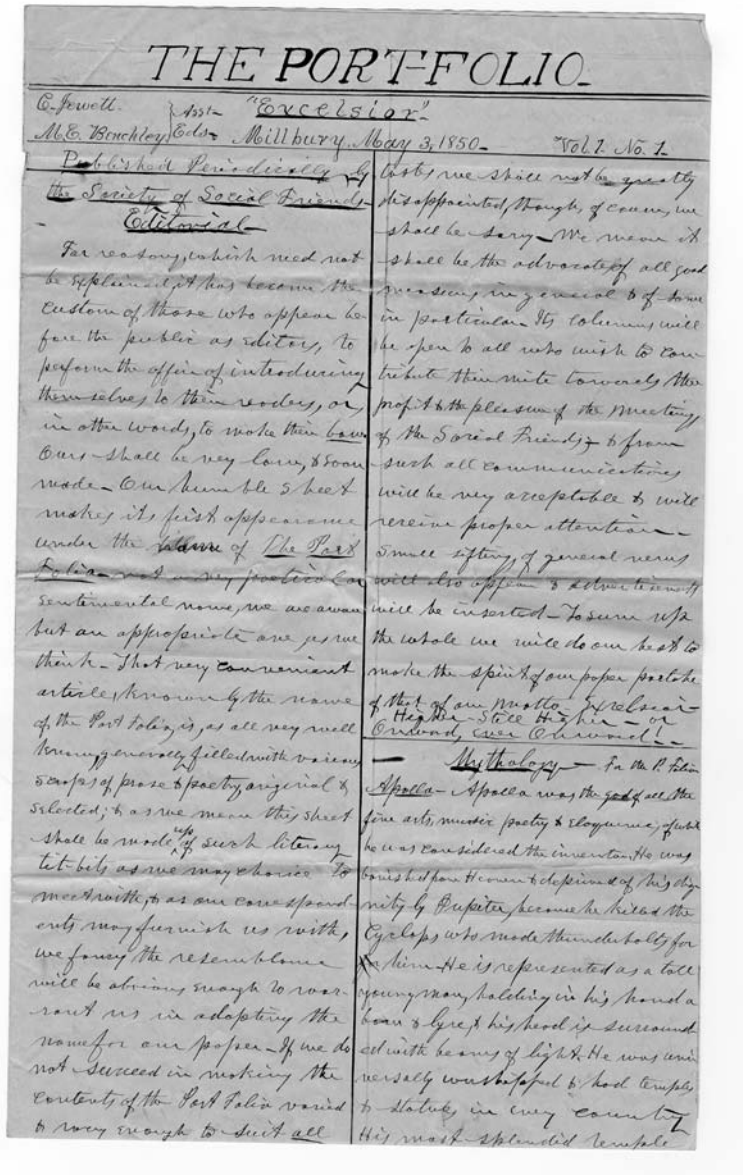


Fig. 2A. The Port-Folio [Millbury, MA], May 3, 1850, front page. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Albert E. Barker, the editor of the *Amateur Journal*, may also have been drawn to “Success is counted sweetest” for reasons beyond amateurdom’s and Dickinson’s common genealogy (Fig. 3). Most amateur papers did not last for more than two or three issues, but even in a print subculture characterized by ephemerality, Barker was unusually well acquainted with failure. When a fellow Judsonia amateur, R. E. Krab, published a small history of Arkansas amateur newspapers titled *Chronicles of Amateurdom in Arkansas* (1883), he quoted Barker describing his “experience as an amateur” as “a series of ‘ups and downs’ in which the ‘downs’ have evidently predominated” (17). Indeed, the profile inventories a series of setbacks: Barker applied for the *Amateur Journal* to be classified as second-class mail (a category subject to lower postage costs); he was rejected; he combined with another paper; that paper suspended; he restarted his previous newspaper; and he took on a co-owner and co-editor, who quickly left. Later, *Chronicles* tells the story of Barker’s failed plan to organize an Interstate Association encompassing amateurs from Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri. He recruited other editors to the cause and they wrote and organized on its behalf, but when he went to St. Louis for the meeting he discovered that he was the only visiting amateur there. “Barker did not give up until the last moment, and to say that he was bitterly disappointed, is putting it mild,” yet Krab seems unsurprised (34). Although Barker was “greatly enthused” about amateurdom, he was a “by no means brilliant writer,” Krab notes (19).



Fig. 3. Albert E. Barker, from William C. Ahlhauser, *Ex-Presidents of the National Amateur Press Association* (Athol, MA: W. P. Cook, 1919). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-20019409.

Enthusiasm unabated, one year after Krab's publication of *Chronicles of Amateur Journalism in Arkansas*, Barker undertook a quixotic run for the presidency of the National Amateur Press Association. But as another amateur recalled years later, "small of stature, boyish appearing more than his years justified, far from home, opposed by the skilled politicians and leaders," Barker quickly "foresaw defeat . . . and withdrew from the contest" (Spencer 47-8). Barker's roommate at the convention, fellow amateur John Travis Nixon, attributed Barker's defeat to a more specific humiliation. In his 1900 history of the N.A.P.A., Nixon reminisced that while getting ready, Barker asked Nixon to adjust his tie for him, a task "beyond my skill in those days." Barker said he would find another boy in their party to do it, but the two became so engrossed in a discussion of amateur affairs that they didn't notice when the other boys left. Disaster ensued:

Mr. Barker was forced to place his tie in his pocket, and with his gold collar button exposed was greeted by the assembled delegates at the hotel. A few hours later his tie was in place, but even unto this day he is known as the delegate who attended the Milwaukee convention without a necktie, or more often, for such things grow with passing years, as the "man without a collar". . . I learned later in the week that this little episode was one of the main factors in turning the tide against him. His friends sought to explain it by insisting that it was one of the customs of the section from which he hailed, but it was not so received. (Nixon 122)

This anecdote demonstrates some of the animating tensions of amateurism. Although amateur networks linked boys across the United States, they remained defined by regional identities, a fact that Barker's supporters unsuccessfully tried to exploit by arguing that going tie-less was "one of the customs" of Arkansas. Indeed, sectional rivalries periodically threatened to splinter "the 'dom": there was a long-running disagreement between eastern and western amateurs about where to hold the annual N.A.P.A. convention, for example, and when an African-American amateur named Herbert A. Clarke was elected Third Vice President in 1879, southern amateurs "seceded" from the N.A.P.A. and formed the Amateur Anti-Negro Admission Association ("Civil Rights" 3).⁶ And ironically, among a constituency of amateurs, Barker's apparent unprofessionalism cost him the race. His misstep of being too amateurish for amateurism points up a definitional problem: what did it mean to be an amateur?

Reading amateur newspapers hardly clarifies amateurism's reasons for existence. It suggests that one did not start an amateur newspaper because one

had something to say. Almost unrelievedly homogenous, derivative, and self-referential, amateurdom was so insular that it was a wonder it did not collapse in on itself. Journalism as an activity, in other words, seems to have mattered less than amateurism as an identity; it is no coincidence that amateur journalists more often referred to themselves simply as “amateurs” and their print culture as “amateurdom,” than “amateur journalists” and “amateur journalism.” Barker himself “became interested in amateur journalism through an amateur law society,” hopping from one amateur role to another (Ahlhauser 37). But while amateurs were heavily invested in their own amateurism, they disagreed over what that designation meant.

Predictably, the question “what is an amateur?” became one of the standbys of amateur journalism—and one of the few topics on which the amateurs did not all say the same thing. It was a particularly difficult question because, as Lisa Gitelman has pointed out, amateurdom exploded at a moment when countervailing notions of literary professionalism were only just emerging. Many amateurs contended that it simply referred to age. As one guide explained, the term “has a separate or different signification from the word found in the dictionary. In *Amateurdom . . .* the expression is used to denote what may be called, in plain terms, a boy editor, or boy journalist” (Zerbe 1). Other amateurs—especially the kinds of ambitious boys who attended N.A.P.A. conventions—saw their amateur status as less a matter of age than as an orientation toward professionalism. As *The Ark*, from Portland, Oregon, put it, “The real object of amateur journalism is to prepare the youth of the land for professional editors, printers and authors,” yet, the writer added disapprovingly, “some of the amateurs do not realize it” (“Amateurdom and Its Workings” 17). His testy aside presumably indicts those who did not take amateurism seriously enough, a constant thorn in the side of more sober-minded amateurs. Perhaps the worst offender was the short-lived newspaper *The Bomb*, whose editors caused a stir by dropping the decorous tone of most amateurs and devoting their tiny paper to blasts against their peers: “C.B. Turrill. It seems that this Amateur is a noted San Francisco vagabond, loafer, thief, cheat, etc. Let us give him hot Cod Fish balls” (2). Inquiring “why every amateur is not a hero to the full extent of his capabilities,” John Winslow Snyder, the first N.A.P.A. president, connected his colleagues’ failures with their frequent observation that the word “amateur” derives from the Latin *amare*, to love. “Because an amateur journalist is a *lover* of journalism, some have the idea that he should be as playful, idle and silly as another class of lovers are reputed to appear,” Snyder grouched, but this is a “radically false notion” (“The Youth of Thos. Carlyle” 1).

While many saw amateurdom as pre-professional training, still others saw it as standing in principled opposition to the professional press. As one writer using the pseudonym "St. Ronan" put it, "Independent in thought, feeling and action, of everything that pertains to the professional world, they stand by themselves, to think, feel and act for themselves" (4). Yet while St. Ronan was careful to distinguish the goals of amateurdom from those of "the professional world," he nonetheless understood amateurs as motivated by accomplishment: amateurs are animated, he explained, by "the success of Amateurdom," even as he defined that success as challenging the professional world rather than emulating it. On this point he found common ground with Snyder, who believed amateurdom inherently inclined toward success. "'Amateur,' rendered in its proper sense, is a word in itself prophetic of victory. It tells of an eagerness to engage in the battle, of a resolution to attain unto 'the perfect day.' If there have been mistakes in the past, if there be weakness in the present, if danger lurks in the future, they are all the offspring of a false interpretation of this word" ("Earnestness in the Work" 46). Yet at the same time that Snyder declares amateurs on the side of "victory," his reference to past "mistakes," present "weakness," and future "danger" suggests—like *The Ark's* disapproving aside about insufficiently professional amateurs—that not all amateurs considered themselves winners.

When Albert E. Barker reprinted "Success is counted sweetest" under the masthead of the *Amateur Journal*, he offered one such "false interpretation" of amateurdom. Barker's appropriation of Dickinson articulated an amateur ethos that discounted success and bound itself instead to failure, or what Barker, in his *Chronicles* profile, called "the 'downs.'" This is not to say that Barker did not sometimes strive for forms of success himself, as his bid for the N.A.P.A. presidency attests. Perhaps it was the gap between his lofty ambitions and his frequent disappointments that attuned him to Dickinson's poem and led him to adopt it as a philosophy of amateurdom.

But what kind of a manifesto for amateurdom does "Success is counted sweetest" offer? In the context of the *Amateur Journal*, the poem reads as a rejoinder to those, like Snyder, who championed amateurdom from the perspective of champions. The first two lines, taken alone—as Barker encourages the reader to take them, by setting them off from the rest of the poem with a space—imply that those who rate success most highly are actually the least successful. Taken as a whole, though, the poem proposes a more subtle point: that losers not only value but actually understand winning best, "agonizing" as this knowledge is to them. Dickinson illustrates this asymmetry by contrasting the noise of a victorious army

with the excruciatingly keen hearing of a wounded enemy soldier. This martial metaphor probably instigated the poem's first publication, after a discouraging winter for the Union army, suggesting that its history of situational reading began long before the amateurs embraced it. In the context of the *Amateur Journal*, however, it reworks the militaristic language of drumbeaters for amateurism like Snyder, who considered the word "amateur" to be "prophetic of victory," by questioning the definition of "victory." Barker, via Dickinson, splits off the "eagerness to engage in the battle," to borrow Snyder's words, from winning it. Indeed, Dickinson's description of the winners as the "Purple Host" suggests that winners win because they play a stacked deck. The adjective "purple" might refer to the soldiers' gory bodies, but it also connotes royalty, both in popular usage and in Dickinson's lexicon.⁷ Likewise, "Host" designates both an army and Christ, casting the winning soldiers as God's chosen. "Purple Host" thus conflates success that is won with success that is inherited or given, a miniaturized version of "nothing succeeds like success." This fatalism cuts against amateur journalism's ideology of bootstrap-pulling in ways that might have felt very sweet indeed to stymied amateurs like Barker—or, for that matter, to other members of "the 'dom" who had not been admitted into its full privileges: those who were less affluent; who lived outside its center of gravity in northeastern cities; or who simply preferred to envision amateurism as antithetical to an emergent goal-oriented professional world.

Furthermore, Barker does not reprint "Success is counted sweetest" word for word from *A Masque of Poets*. He changes the poem slightly in ways that jostle its inversion of success into something still more perplexing. Dickinson's concern is epistemological: success is best understood in its absence. Barker's version turns this into an ontological critique that questions whether success exists at all. Although amateur typography was sometimes sloppy, and the papers' contents were often determined by the need to fill out or fit on a page, Barker's changes seem like deliberate revisions rather than compositional errors or formatting maneuvers. Here are the two versions of the poem, both titled "Success":

SUCCESS is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a Nectar
Requires the sorest need.
Not one of all the Purple Host
Who took the flag to-day,
Can tell the definition,

So plain, of Victory,
As he defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonizing clear.

(*A Masque of Poets* 174)

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag to-day,
Can tell the definition,
So plain, of Victory,
As he defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear,
The distant strains of triumph
Break agonizing, clear.

(*Amateur Journal* 1)

Barker reformats the poem in several ways. He staggers the lines, possibly to make the poem look more “poetic.” He also replaces the all-capitals opening “SUCCESS” with the more diffident “Success.” Typographically, success becomes less substantial. Barker chips away at it still further in the final line, when he moves the comma after “break” to after “agonizing.” As a result, the line loses the performative break following “Break” and makes “agonizing” the primary adjective, rather than the modifier of “clear.” Triumph becomes more clearly agonizing, while it becomes less clear what is “clear”: are the strains of triumph clear, or just the fact that they are agonizing? In the most striking revision, the third and fourth lines of the poem (“To comprehend a Nectar / Requires the sorest Need”) disappear entirely. Excising these lines works against a binary of success and failure, refusing to equate those who “ne’er succeed” with those who are in “sorest need” of success. Barker’s omission also de-emphasizes the sweetness of success, which is no longer objectively “a Nectar” but simply “counted sweetest.” The paradox of the first lines becomes starker: by removing the subsequent analogy to “a Nectar” one could “comprehend” (in the sense of grasping physically as well as understanding), Barker emphasizes their dramatic self-negation of success. The space after the second line highlights this by isolating the first two lines, turning them into a kind of epigram, or perhaps an epigraph for the rest of the poem. But

the space also awkwardly confesses the excision, and the disrupted ABCB rhyme scheme (if one includes the slant rhyme of “to-day” and “Victory”) confirms that something is amiss. While Dickinson’s poem scuttles “the definition . . . of Victory,” Barker’s version of “Success is counted sweetest” announces its own failure. In doing so, it makes “the downs” into a badge of honor that any amateur might wear proudly.

But Barker himself did not long remain a failure. Although his “boyish” qualities may have doomed his first candidacy, six years later, at the comparatively ripe age of 24, he made another run for president of the N.A.P.A. and won (Nixon 196-8). Perhaps he abandoned his critique of success. Or perhaps, ironically, failure became a successful strategy for amateurism. As the movement grew, amateurs increasingly traded their identification with achievement for an identification with oppression. “Boys and young men [are] systematically suppressed,” Cincinnati’s *Idyllic Hours* declared (3); the Bowersburg *Illinois Amateur* agreed that “to be a boy is to be somebody without a right in the world” (“Boys’ Rights—By a Boy” 1). The amateurs’ marginalization was largely invented, given that they were mostly white, affluent males. But the posture bound them together in a common cause, turning the grievances of adolescence into a collective identity. Dickinson’s unknown, unknowing fanclub of amateurs in Judsonia and, presumably, among their exchanges beyond, thus not only helps counter the long-standing myth that Dickinson was unappreciated in her own lifetime. It also gives her a new place in American literary history, as an unwitting participant in one of the first youth print subcultures.

Notes

1. Cristanne Miller first reported my discovery of the poem’s publication in her editorial note to the *Emily Dickinson Journal* (vii).
2. On *A Masque of Poets*, see Aubrey Starke’s “‘No Names’ and ‘Round Robins,’” as well as Madeleine B. Stern and Daniel Shealy’s “The No Name Series” (389-390).
3. Franklin dates the earliest surviving version of the poem to summer 1859.
4. Dickinson’s childhood friend Emily Fowler Ford described the newspaper in a reminiscence of Dickinson that Mabel Loomis Todd published alongside Dickinson’s letters to Ford in *Letters of Emily Dickinson*: “This paper was all in script, and was passed around the school, where the contributions were easily recognized from the handwriting” (129).
5. Here I follow Alexandra Socarides in thinking of the sheet, rather than the fascicle, as Dickinson’s “primary unit of composition” (22).
6. On the Clarke controversy, see Lara Langer Cohen, “‘The Emancipation of Boyhood’: Postbellum Teenage Subculture and the Amateur Press.”

7. Among other examples, see "Full royal is his Retinue! / Full purple is his state!" in "Wait till the Majesty of Death" (Fr169) and "Purple - / the Color of a Queen, is this -" (Fr875).

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