Queer Heritage and Strategic Humour in Recent Screen Biofictions of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract:
The article discusses three latest screen portrayals of Emily Dickinson, namely Terence Davies's biopic *A Quiet Passion* (2016), Madeleine Olnek's independent biographical comedy *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018), and Alena Smith's Apple TV+ teen series *Dickinson* (2019-2021), examining to what extent these texts can be termed neo-Victorian biofictions. The article focuses on the latter two screen products, which are analysed as queer and self-reflexive biofictions, questioning and subverting the dominant cultural image of the poet as a reclusive writer and thinker, and portraying her in an irreverent and often humorous way. Their respective creators both chose to make Dickinson's love affair with her sister-in-law the driving force of the plot, demythologising the poet and claiming her as an icon of queer heritage. In turn, Terence Davies's 2016 biopic is treated as a counterfoil to the other two, by virtue of its startlingly conservative and heteronormative agenda. Furthermore, the article discusses the use of humour as a strategy in queer biofiction, and finally it analyses how Olnek's and Smith's projects deploy romantic comedy tropes in their presentation of the romance between Emily Dickinson and Sue Gilbert.

Keywords: *A Quiet Passion*, biofiction, biomythography, *Dickinson*, Emily Dickinson, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, post-authenticity, queer heritage, queer humour, *Wild Nights with Emily*.

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The opening line of one of Emily Dickinson's better-known poems – "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (Dickinson 2016: 564) – may as well have been written to describe the strategy of creators of modern biofictions, i.e. fictional cultural texts that depict the lives of actual people (usually historical personages or famous living persons). Perceived as one of the varieties of historiographic metafiction, biofiction provokes a number of questions concerning "poetic 'truthfulness', 'authenticity', or 'post-authenticity'" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 44) that are at the core of the genre. Biofictions that portray writers are particularly prone to a self-reflexive discussion of the

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blurring of the lines between facts and fictions. By adapting real lives into narratives, and merging historically existing authors with their fictional creations, biofiction offers the nostalgic possibility to "close the gap between past and present of the reader and [fulfil] a desire to rewrite the past in a new context" (Hutcheon 1988: 118). In this article, we examine two feature films and a television series (all released between 2016 and 2019), which re-imagine the life of the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson, raising questions about authenticity and fictionality in biofiction. In particular, we are interested in the processes of demythologising Dickinson and bringing to the fore the queer relationship she had with Sue Gilbert,[1] her childhood friend turned sister-in-law, that constitutes the focal point of two of these screen productions. We also examine the role of humour as a queer strategy used in order to debunk the Dickinson Myth and to bring Dickinson's biography into the realm of queer heritage, defined by Dianne F. Sadoff as "a sentimental project of making gay people visible through history […] taking a broadly positive view of homosexuality […] while depicting pasts that did not" (Sadoff 2009: 200). This purview means that we focus our attention on Madeleine Olnek's independent biographical comedy *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) and the Apple TV+ series *Dickinson* (2019–2021) created by Alena Smith, while also covering Terence Davies's biopic *A Quiet Passion* (2016), which omits to acknowledge Dickinson's sexual orientation, as a context (and contrast) for the other two productions.

1. (Queer) Biofiction versus Biopic

In neo-Victorian criticism, the term 'biofiction' is applied to the large body of quasi-biographical cultural texts that explore the lives of nineteenth-century subjects. It has typically been used to denote literary texts written in the twentieth or twenty-first century, which present fictionalised versions of lives of historical subjects from the broad nineteenth century. Theoreticians of biofiction draw attention to the fact that texts written in this mode are characterised by "deliberate but usually un-signalled alterations of the historical record" and on "fact-based speculation and improvisation" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 5, 6). Unlike classic biographies, which raise claims to factuality, biofictions embrace the freedom offered by fictionalisations that allows contemporary audiences to imagine alternative life paths for their favourite historical characters and fill in the gaps in historical accounts about them. Like neo-Victorianism itself, biofiction engages with the idea of

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cultural memory, not replicating the past *per se* (see Gefter Wondrich 2020: 111), but rather probing the nature of cultural heritage and ideologies responsible for collective visions of the past.

In the introduction to their edited collection on neo-Victorian biofiction, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben enumerate the ways in which biofictions may be categorised. These include the categories of "revisionary biofiction", in which master narratives are subverted and historical subjects are re-voiced, and the biofiction of revelation, which, "fuelled by contemporary confessional and celebrity culture" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 11-31, 18), divulges the well-guarded secrets of prominent Victorians.

This categorisation emphasises that neo-Victorian biofiction opens up possibilities for a subversive, "empathic and denunciatory" depiction of the nineteenth-century past (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 28), directly addressing erstwhile taboos such as gender identity and sexual orientation. Constituting what Julian Wolfreys terms a "minority report" for the Victorian era (Wolfreys qtd. in Kohlke 2013: 10), biofiction delves into queer sexualities of the period's celebrated figures, e.g. Henry James's closeted homosexuality in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), and brings to the forefront the forgotten queer figures of the past, e.g. the transgender James Barry in Patricia Dunker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999) or Anne Lister depicted in the television series *Gentleman Jack* (2019-2022), created by Sally Wainwright. Alternatively, it can involve creating a fabricated queer context for heterosexual cis-figures of the Victorian past – for instance, the lesbian resolution of a criminal intrigue in the Brontë crime mystery *The Vanished Bride* (2019) by Bella Ellis. Such re-imaginings of the past are a vital part of a larger neo-historical project of restoring the queer heritage – in other words, excavating and representing past queer lives in an attempt to make queer genealogical connections between the past and the present. In this respect, biofictions are unquestionably postmodern, and their function, according to Michael Lackey, is to tell "stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, signify human interiors, or picture cultural ideologies" (Lackey qtd. in Wondrich 2020: 104).

On the one hand, depicting nineteenth-century figures as queer clashes with our stereotype of repressed Victorians, bound by respectability and sexual taboos. The audiences might therefore accuse queer neo-Victorian biofictions of presentism and fantasising. On the other hand, the project is

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about bringing into the light forgotten facts and secrets, and often is a result of meticulous and rigorous research, such as the deciphering of Anne Lister's coded diaries. Authors of biofictions should not therefore be systematically accused of fabrication. On the whole, their queer visions prove to be more authentic than the restrictively heterocentric depictions of the past. This paradox shows that "post-authentic biofictions may still serve ethical purposes" and, when it comes to queer history, "biofiction itself thus becomes an alternative or compensatory virtual archive" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 42, 44). This phenomenon is evident in Dickinson's biofictions, as will be shown below.

The concept of 'biofiction', usually used to refer to literary texts, can be broadened beyond literature to encompass other types of cultural products also, such as films, television series and theatrical plays that share the same approach to historical subjects. In this article, therefore, we use the term 'screen biofiction' to refer to post-authentic televisual and filmic portrayals of Dickinson. It should be noted that when it comes to cinematic renditions of historical lives, a widely accepted term is already in use – 'biographical (moving) picture' or 'biopic' for short. Hence we would stress that the difference between screen biofiction and biopic is one of degree, and that a certain overlap between the two is possible, even inevitable. As for the biopic, George Custen in his foundational study of the genre offers a somewhat minimalist definition, describing a biopic as "a film that presents the life of a historical person, past or present" (Custen 1992: 5). Biopics that use a relatively cavalier approach to the established facts, or (as is often the case) centre on a crucial omission in the subject's life use essentially the same strategy as that of the authors of literary biofictions, and therefore may fall into the category of screen biofictions. Specifically, notwithstanding the medium's shift from literature to film, they fulfil Kohlke's requirements for "celebrity biofiction", which "speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures" (Kohlke 2013: 7).

In her recent monograph devoted to the literary biopic, *Screening the Author* (2019), Hila Shachar analyses the strategies of creators of modern biopics of canonical writers, including *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and the Jane Austen biopic *Becoming Jane* (2007). Shiller remarks that these films' plots are largely fictions invented by screenwriters, who mix rudimentary biographical facts with recognisable tropes from the respective authors' works (Shachar 2019: 29).[2] She furthermore argues that the release of

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Shakespeare in Love in 1998 coincided with the general revival of interest in the literary biopic and was boosted by the popularity of heritage film in 1980s and 1990s (Shachar 2019: 32). As a result, the blueprint for the modern literary biopic was born, which, as Shachar notes, often incorporates a wholly or partly imaginary youthful love affair of the subject and suggests that the unknown or hidden love was the stimulus behind the author's literary output (Shachar 2019: 29). This particular element of the literary biopic template is used subversively in two of the three Dickinson biofictions analysed in the article.

In fact, the degree of fictionality in such screen productions as *Shakespeare in Love* or *Dickinson* brings to mind the concept of appropriation, which, according to Julie Sanders, "affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 2006: 26). Transposing Sander's distinction between adaptation and appropriation to our discussion of biofiction, we might note parallels: instead of being interested in whether biofiction is less or more recognisably related to the biography of a historical person, we might instead engage in a discussion of cultural memory that allows the past to be transcribed into present culture in a specific, often politically charged way. In a later study, Sanders proposes another take on the subject, noting that appropriations contextualise the source texts anew, in order to "reflect the pressing concerns of their own time by 'updating' and relocating their source text, all in the interest of resonance, relevance, and topicality" (Sanders 2010: 4). Nine years later, in her definitive analysis of the concept, she discusses appropriation as an "active critical commentary, [...] creative re-interpretation and [...] 'writing back' to the original", which is "informed by the activist scholarship of postcolonialism, poststructuralism, feminism, and queer theory" (Sanders 2019: n.p.). This revisionary urge is what appropriation and biofiction have in common.

Thus, what transpires from the above discussion is another crucial difference between biopics and (screen) biofictions. While biographical novels and biopics might be *adapting* lives – translating them into a new medium of literature or film, with varied degrees of fidelity – (screen) biofictions *appropriate* lives, that is, take over historical figures and interject them into new fictional contexts, often with degrees of anachronism, presentism, or even pure fantasy (as evidenced, e.g., by Seth Graham Smith's 2010 novel *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and its 2012 film adaptation).

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The notes of controversy and confusion that such appropriations introduce into the cultural debate testify to the fact that audiences are strongly attached to the issue of the factual fidelity of biographical texts. The recent plethora of post-authentic biofictions invites critics and audiences to examine the opacity of construct and the ethical investment in the revisionist potential that such appropriations may offer. While biopics fictionalise a biography of a historical person, "biofictions self-consciously interrogate the very nature of [...] documented 'facts' and how historical knowledge of past lives is constituted" (Gefter Wondrich 2020: 104). The self-reflexivity of biofiction, combined with its revisionary agenda, its re-contextualising and postmodern attitude to fact and fiction is what makes it one of the favourite modes of neo-Victorian expression, which is invested in the "*(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis).

2. Biomythography and the Dickinson Myth

The biofictions of female nineteenth-century writers are especially (although not exclusively) complicated by the mythologisation of their lives that is the result of the juxtaposition between their celebrity status and Victorian expectations as to female social roles. The best-known example, the Brontë Myth (see Miller 2001), illustrates how Charlotte Brontë has been immortalised as a "martyred heroine of a tragic life, driven by duty" and a literary genius, while her "wicked sense of humour, her sarcasm, her childhood *joie de vivre* which enlivens the juvenilia, are completely ignored" (Barker qtd. in Benton 2009: 52). Such an image of the writer has been perpetuated by the "matrix of interlocking stories" (Stoneman 2002: 2014) that included, above all, Elizabeth Gaskell's 1857 biography of Charlotte Brontë. The popular public perceptions of Jane Austen and, indeed, also of Dickinson, have been made to fit the mould of a shy and reclusive nineteenth-century spinster, one which has been crystallised – partly during their lifetimes, and partly posthumously – by biographers, family members and editors. In *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (2009), Michael Benton names this myth-making process "biomythography" and, based on his work on the Brontës, identifies five stages through which lives become biographised, fictionalised, mythologised, turned into "factions" and demythologised (Benton 2009: 53). What Benton calls "factions" – a term taken from journalism and television, signifying "stories with a basis in fact

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but embellished with invented elements" (Benton 2009: 52) – corresponds to the above definition of screen biofiction, whose defining characteristic is appropriation of historical figures' life events. Benton's description of the perpetual circle of biomythography brings home the realisation that biographies, while arguably dealing with facts, are nevertheless likewise involved in myth-making and fictionalisation.

Benton also notes that the effort to demythologise may lead to further mythologisations of famous lives (Benton 2009: 53) – a realisation also evident in Lucasta Miller's constatation that "all biographers have their own agendas" and that it is impossible to write "the definite biography" (Miller 2001: xiii). It is, however, rather limiting to assume – as Benton seems to be doing – that only biographers may demythologise a biomythography. We would argue that due to the revisionary and self-reflexive nature of biofictions, they may become part of the same cycle, not only as regards its mythologising elements, but also its demythologising ones. As a result, stages four (biofictionalisation) and five (demythologisation) may be repeated *ad aeternum*. With each new demythologised biofiction, another mutated myth will arise (see Benton 2009: 53), and with it, in time, the need to further demythologise it. Importantly for our discussion here, this cycle is spurred into action by cultural values of the period in which the given biofictions are written, evolving organically and adapting to fit the changing milieu (Benton 2009: 51). The protean nature of biomythography, in which, we argue, biofiction plays a pivotal role, corresponds to the neo-Victorian ambition to revise the past, bringing into view what has been hidden, censored or forgotten. Neo-Victorian biofiction as the appropriation of the nineteenth-century past may take the form of 'biographilia' – "a form of scopophilia – the desire to know forbidden secrets [of] […] the dead" (Kaplan 2007: 47). We can also equate it with a form of voyeurism, where the audience is obsessed with "recovering the (historical) author's 'true' and 'authentic' self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona" (Novak and Mayer 2014: 25). Cora Kaplan's as well as Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer's focus on the sensationalism of neo-Victorian biofictions complicates the vision of neo-Victorianism as invested in righting the wrongs of the past, but also further explains how revised biofictions may lead to the creation of new myths that will necessitate further debunking.

The process of Dickinson's mythologisation mostly follows "the Brontë paradigm" proposed by Benton (2009: 47-51), although in this case it

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has a distinct queer problematics: a significant aspect of the Dickinson Myth is the absence of Sue Gilbert as Emily's lesbian lover and creative collaborator. Additionally, it is not just the biography, but rather the fascinating history of the editing of Dickinson's poems and letters, against the study of her manuscripts, that lies at the core of Dickinson's mythologisation and demythologisation, as evidenced by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's seminal edition of Dickinson and Gilbert's letters titled *Open Me Carefully* (1998) and by Hart and Smith's subsequent research.

When Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd co-edited the first edition of Dickinson's poems in 1890, the expectation from the readers was to imagine the famous poetess as "a tortured, delicate woman" (Hart and Smith 1998: xiii). Todd had in fact laid the groundwork for just such a romanticised image of Dickinson in her private journal as early as 1882, when she wrote the following famous entry:

> She has not been out of the house for fifteen years. [...] She writes the strangest poems, and very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius. She wears always white, & has her hair arranged as was the fashion fifteen years ago when she went into retirement. (Todd qtd. in Erkkila 1985: 101)

In 1894 when Todd produced *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (see Hart and Smith 1998: xv), this image of Dickinson was solidified, and Smith stresses that the representation of the poet as "a reclusive figure who robed herself in white and harbored some 'secret sorrow'" was not only conventional, but also marketable (Smith 2006: 55). Thus, the myth of Dickinson as "an inaccessible, ethereal hermit, too rare for this earthly plane, and probably undone by unrequited love for any or all of several male suitors whose identities have been the stuff of speculation for countless readers" was born (Hart and Smith 1998: xiii). It is paradoxical that the early editor who was – at least partly – responsible for the Dickinson Myth, Mabel Loomis Todd, never met Dickinson in the flesh. She was, nevertheless, personally invested in the public representation of the poet, as she became Austin Dickinson's – Emily's brother – mistress, and thus a rival to Austin's wife, Sue Gilbert. Therefore, Todd's obliteration of Sue from Dickinson's papers, including some poems and letter-poems, was dictated not only by a desire to avoid the controversy that would be occasioned by revealing the homoerotic nature of

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Emily and Sue's close friendship, but also by a sort of jealousy. It seems plausible that she "wanted to obfuscate the centrality of Susan's roles in Emily's writing processes, and went to great lengths to suppress any trace of Susan as literary collaborator and confidante" (Smith 2006: 53).

It is therefore apparent that the editors of Dickinson's poems and letters are responsible for, first, an elimination of certain aspects of her biography that did not fit the convention of a martyr-poetess, and then for solidifying this image into the fiction of "the recluse spinster belle of Amherst" (Hart and Smith 1998: xiii-xiv), thus fulfilling the first two stages of the myth-making process delineated by Benton. It is difficult to say whether Dickinson herself had a hand in the creation of her myth, as was the case with Charlotte Brontë and her family. By all accounts, Dickinson was a private individual and cherished solitude, which is an understandable attitude in someone invested in intellectual and creative work. However, what would be accepted as normal behaviour in a male writer, as a result of gender bias was reforged into "a pathological reclusiveness and an indication of intense vulnerability and wounding, not as a consciously chosen way of life" (Hart and Smith 1998: xvii). It is therefore doubtful that Dickinson, who actively avoided the public eye, consciously participated in the building of her own myth. Her closest family, however, could have inadvertently played a part in obfuscating the true nature of the relationship between Emily Dickinson and Sue Gilbert; it was after all Sue herself who destroyed some of their correspondence that she deemed "too personal and adulatory ever to be printed" (Gilbert qtd. in Hart and Smith 1998: xxii), and many letters were also burned by Emily's sister, Lavinia. It was, however, mostly Todd who erased pencilled references to Sue and inked over Sue's name in most of the papers she was asked by Lavinia to edit.

The removal of the traces of an affectionate and intimate relationship between Dickinson and her sister-in-law was, of course, motivated by the desire to excise any references to the non-normative, sexual bond between them. As a result, Dickinson became mythologised into a spinster who had been spurned in love by a mysterious male "Master" (a one-sided relationship akin to Charlotte Brontë's unrequited passion for Monsieur Héger). The default heteronormativity of nineteenth-century gender norms is even more evident when one realises that out of Dickinson's surviving correspondence, only three letters were addressed to the "Master," while she and Sue Gilbert engaged in a rich, continuous correspondence (Hart and Smith 1998: xii),

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comprising nearly 500 pieces (Smith 2006: 52). As Hart and Smith point out, the strength and depth of their relationship was easy to dismiss as a conventional romantic female friendship, perceived in the nineteenth century as a natural stage in the development of adolescent women (Hart and Smith 1998: xiv). In the case of Dickinson and Gilbert, however, the relationship lasted for almost forty years, continuing till the poet's death in 1886 (Smith 2006: 53).

Admittedly, the word 'lesbian' itself was not used in nineteenth-century discourse, nor was the practice openly acknowledged in public or recognised in the law (see Ussher 1991: 84). The surviving correspondence and the current state of research does not allow us to unequivocally ascertain whether Dickinson's relationship with Sue Gilbert was of a sexual nature. However, there are strong indications that it might have been. We should definitely treat the term "romantic friendship" as one of those historical phenomena that are included in queer historiography, which, as Martha Vicinus has noted: "may – and may not – [have] include[d] genital sex. When we can't even claim a specific sexual expression as a key to our past, we must accept a fragmentary and confusing history" (Vicinus 2004: 470). On the other hand, lesbian readings of Emily Dickinson's poetry, such as the one proposed by Paula Bennet, demonstrates that Dickinson was inspired by female sexuality and used natural metaphors for a description of intimate female relationships and clitoral and oral sexual relations (Bennet 1990: 104-105). It is therefore plausible that the mythologising performed by Todd and others was intended to 'spin' (to use Benton's nomenclature) Dickinson's biography in such a way that her work would yield itself to heterosexual readings – as it did for at least a hundred years. The heteronormative bias of Dickinson's mythologisation is evident in the fact that Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Sue's daughter and Emily's niece, who in the introduction to her own edition of Dickinson's poems, *The Single Hound* (1914), presented her mother's perspective on their friendship (Smith 2006: 61), was largely dismissed as unreliable and self-serving when she attempted to present Sue and Emily's strong bond. In contrast, Todd, who never met Emily and was the reason behind Austin's unfaithfulness to Sue, was for a long time accepted by Dickinson's biographers and scholars as an objective and well-informed source (Smith 2006: 53). The relative value accorded to Todd's and Bianchi's accounts shows that by the time the latter published her book, the Dickinson

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Myth was already fossilised into a heterosexual story of a love-scorned, eccentric, and lonely genius.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Dickinson Myth has been perpetuated by subsequent biofictional practices – adaptations of Dickinson's life into film, drama, television, and even song. Most famously, the representation of Dickinson as an agoraphobic and eccentric spinster, secretive about her poetry, who lived a secluded life under the protection of her respectable family, was consolidated by William Luce's play *The Belle of Amherst* (1976), with Julie Harris's portrayal of the poet becoming the definitive version of Dickinson for many viewers (Charyn 2016: 15). Some of the more notable novelistic biofictions written in the same vein and published in the 1990s include Jamie Fuller's *The Diary of Emily Dickinson* (1996) and Judith Farr's *I Never Came to You in White* (1997), both of which, as Smith notes, "either leave out […] Susan altogether or depict her as highly problematic, even distasteful and despicable" (Smith 2006: 63). These early biofictions were no doubt influenced by the mythologisation performed by biographies that were written in the one hundred years after Todd's first edition of Dickinson's poems (Smith 2006: 63).

Nevertheless, in the second half of the twentieth century the heteronormative Dickinson myth was shaken by a growing recognition among biographers and literary scholars that some of Dickinson's poems and letters were clearly homoerotic. The first biography to suggest that – to the shock and disbelief of the academic establishment – was that written by Rebecca Patterson in 1951; this was later followed by research conducted by Lillian Faderman and others, while the most influential among the various publications questioning the myth is the aforementioned 1998 edition of Dickinson and Gilbert's letters edited by Hart and Smith. Other literary critics, such as Adalaide Morris, Judy Grahn, Toni McNaron and Paula Bennett have read Dickinson's poetry as an expression of a joyous sexual celebration of femininity, discovering that "Dickinson used relationships to the female and to individual women such as her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson to empower herself as a woman and poet" (Bennet 1990: 105-106). This new wave of reading Dickinson's work and life through a lesbian lens has constituted demythologisation, although it might also have the potential to become a new myth of a lesbian literary icon. Although it is possible to find recent biofictions that perpetuate the conventional and heterosexual Dickinson Myth, there seems to be a strong current of reshaping the present

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state of research on Dickinson's lesbianism into biofictions that would see the poet as part of queer heritage, in an attempt to reclaim a forgotten queer past.

3. Queer Heritage and Queer Humour

By virtue of their setting in the past, screen biofictions of canonical writers' lives also intersect with another screen genre, that of heritage film. In particular, they seem to dovetail with the categories of post-heritage and anti-heritage films (see Monk 2011: 19-25; Primorac 2017: 58-66). Both these categories need to be defined in the context of what is termed 'heritage film', an earlier phenomenon which they seek to challenge and subvert. The terms 'heritage cinema' and 'heritage film' were coined by Andrew Higson in his 1993 essay 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in which he analysed a spate of British films set in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, released between 1980 and 1991. Looking for commonalities in the ways in which they portrayed the past, Higson noticed that these period films made in the Thatcher era tended to rely on nostalgia and mostly showed a complacent picture of late Victorian and Edwardian times, revelling in the meticulously recreated period details and focusing on representations of lavish and leisurely lifestyles of the upper-middle and upper classes. The term 'heritage cinema' almost immediately came under attack as overly reductive (see Voigts-Virchow 2004: 14), but nonetheless became the accepted term both among critics and within the film industry to denote a certain kind of lavish period film, exemplified by the critically acclaimed productions of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, such as *A Passage to India* (1984) and *A Room with a View* (1985). The heritage films of the 1980s and early 1990s became a benchmark, setting a standard for representing the Victorian and Edwardian period on screen, which was subsequently contested and undermined by films set in the same era that questioned the prevailing uncritical portrayals of class divides, gender roles, and racial relations.

In 1995, writing about a new wave of period films, Claire Monk introduced the term "post-heritage" (Monk 1995: 33) to refer to productions that "self-consciously seek to distance themselves from the heritage film's negative/conservative associations" by adopting "varied strategies that may include […] a generally self-reflective approach to style, adaptation and/or the treatment of history" (Monk 2011: 23). In her overview of neo-Victorianism on screen, Antonija Primorac further examines the distinction

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between the complacent and nostalgic portrayal of the past in the heritage films, and the self-consciously critical approach exemplified by some of the more recent productions (see Primorac 2017: 58-66). The "heritage" versus "post-heritage" dichotomy is definitely not merely a question of chronology, as film and television series employing the unquestioning heritage approach are still being made, as per the example of the phenomenally popular *Downton Abbey* television series (2010-2015) and feature films (2019, 2022), or the television series spin-off/prequel *The Gilded Age* (2022).[3] However, the overall taste seems now to be more in favour of the post-heritage approach. Even in such complacent screen products as the *Downton Abbey* franchise, it has now become *de règle* to bring to the fore the tensions related to class hierarchy, gender inequality, and colonial or racial oppression.

As mentioned before, centring biographical narratives set in the past around the issue of sexual orientation of the subject is in itself a revisionist practice. Queering in post-heritage biopics mainly takes two forms. One approach focuses on reclaiming the queer identity of historical personages, for whom there exists a body of historical evidence as to their orientation, even though their non-heteronormativity was not hitherto expounded in popular culture. The recent screen biofictions of Dickinson and Anne Lister fall into this category. The second approach is completely conjectural, as exemplified by the lesbian love triangle between Queen Anne and her two ladies in waiting in Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Favourite* (2018).

When it comes to the generic affiliation of the three recent productions under study here, an analysis of their approach to their subject makes it clear that they belong to different categories. Terence Davies's *A Quiet Passion* (2016), despite the fact that it was made so recently, does not seem to have any revisionist ambitions. In spite of the fact that it was developed and released in the period of growing popularity of post-heritage films, it is a relatively straightforward heritage biopic, which, as we will prove, contributes to The Dickinson Myth, blatantly disregarding the fact that the foundations of the myth have long been questioned and disproved. In contrast, *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) and *Dickinson* (2019-2021) firmly belong to the category of post-heritage queer biofiction.

In their discussion of neo-Victorian humour, Kohlke and Gutleben rightly note that it is often strategically deployed to address political issues, such as "feminist, postcolonial or anti-ableist agendas" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 3). Irony, ridicule, incongruity and shock have subversive functions and

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may serve as ideological weapons (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 4) – not least of all, as a form of queer disruption of heteronormative narratives of the past. In neo-Victorianism in particular, strategic queer humour may be evoked by the use of deliberate anachronism, presentism, and demythologisation, and as a self-reflexive and subversive commentary on the way queer subjects might be removed from or distorted in the cultural memory. For that reason, biofictions' post-authenticity opens a possibility to create a queer heritage in place of blank spots.

While the intersection of post-heritage film and humour remains under-researched, it can generally be assumed that humour in such biofictional screen products as *Shakespeare in Love*, *Wild Nights with Emily* or *Dickinson* often stems from the disconnect between audience's expectations as to the period setting and the anachronistic nature of dialogues or depicted events. In the more straightforwardly comedic *Shakespeare in Love*, Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) owns a mug inscribed "A Present from Stratford upon Avon" (Madden 1998: 00:04:45) and visits a therapist ("Priest of Psyche") to deal with his writer's block (Madden 1998: 00:06:55-00:09:25). In a similar vein, in Season 1, Ep. 3, 'Wild nights' in *Dickinson*, the teenage Emily (Hailee Steinfeld), just like a twenty-first century teenager, decides to throw a party when her parents go out of town for a few days, or grumbles and rolls her eyes when she is asked by her mother to do chores. Such instances are consistent with the incongruity theory of humour, which, according to Simon Weaver, is currently one of the leading semiotic approaches (Weaver 2016: 228). Weaver's and his colleagues' recent work also led them to positing a new perspective, which they called "equality theory of humour", and which explores the use of humour as a strategy of resistance that helps to undermine existing hierarchies (Mora, Weaver, and Lindo 2015: 2). Working within the same theoretical framework, Mostafa Abedinifard explores the dynamics of resistance in gender humour, broadly defined as "any humour which concerns the differences between men and women" (Abedinifard 2016: 239). Quoting the work of earlier theoreticians (e.g. Shifman 2007, Connell 2009), Abedinifard also notes that gender humour does not need to work only within the strict male-female dichotomy, but can also include same-sex relations, and furthermore, that it can intersect with implied cultural hierarchies of age, race, ethnicity and ability (Abedinifard 2016: 239).

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Alana Smith's *Dickinson* seems to be especially skilful in binding together the three aforementioned types of humour: incongruity, equality and gender. It makes heavy use of anachronisms, especially in dialogue, and plays on the idea that Dickinson is a modern teenager with a progressive sensibility, trapped in the nineteenth century. In Season One, Ep. 1, 'Because I could not stop', her horrified reaction when her marriage-obsessed mother (Jane Krakowski) insists that she should meet a prospective suitor is out-of-sync with the norms of the period, but makes Emily appear relatable to today's audiences, who consider marriage at eighteen to be an aberration. Likewise the protagonist's love affair with Sue, conducted almost in plain sight of her somewhat obtuse brother Austin (Sue's fiancé and then husband) is both an example of restoring Dickinson's identity as a lesbian, thus adding a major figure to the pantheon of queer historical personages, and of queer comedy, in which a happy and fulfilled (albeit secret) lesbian relationship is seen as a triumphant act of rebellion against the dominant conservative and patriarchal values.

While by the mid-2010s the subgenre of queer heritage film had become quite established, such a confident portrayal of a happy lesbian relationship as evidenced in *Dickinson* and *Wild Nights with Emily* is by no means standard in popular culture. Nonetheless, the growing normalisation of queer heritage in today's popular culture is humorously acknowledged by the Saturday Night Live 2021 skit titled 'Lesbian Period Drama', a spoof trailer that parodies *Ammonite* (2020, dir. Francis Lee), the biopic of the Victorian palaeontologist Mary Anning. The trailer mocks some tropes of heritage romantic films such as "gaze choreography" or "the world's saddest flirting" and draws attention to the fact that while queer heritage films are becoming more commonplace, each release still constitutes an exceptional event (Saturday Night Live 2021:00:01:13-00:01:44). This sentiment in fact serves as the punchline of the whole skit, as the trailer ends with a tagline "Lesbian period drama: you get one a year – make the most of it" (Saturday Night Live 2021: 00:02:40-00:02:45). The focus on the eventually unhappy or thwarted lesbian love affairs in recent high profile queer heritage films such as *Ammonite* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019, dir. Céline Sciamma) – which incidentally both get name-checked in the skit – allows for appreciating the panache and demythologising energy of *Wild Nights* and *Dickinson*.

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4. Perpetuating the Heterocentric Myth: *A Quiet Passion*

To illustrate the mythologising and demythologising potential of biofiction, we would like first to briefly analyse the biopic that we see as an example of a heritage film in the post-heritage era, strongly and unquestioningly attached to the Dickinson Myth and invested in erasing Emily Dickinson's relationship with Sue from queer heritage. *A Quiet Passion* (2016), directed by Terence Davies and starring Cynthia Nixon as Dickinson, is a film praised by reviewers for its poetic quality (see Scott 2017: n.p., Sims 2017: n.p.) and Nixon's acting (see Vanzanten 2017: n.p.). It is evident that Davies's ambition was to create a realistic representation of mid-nineteenth-century life in New England, from dialogues, scripted "with elaborate formality" (Edelstein 2017: n.p.), to settings and family relations. The film seems to tick all the boxes when it comes to faithfulness to the known facts of Dickinson's life, including her struggle with institutional religion, her various friendships, and the scandal of her brother's extramarital affair with Mabel Todd. Cynthia Nixon convincingly projects an image of an austere yet brilliant poet who hides burning passions behind the respectability of an upper-middle class lady.

Even though the film starts with a scene at school in which the young Dickinson refuses to accept beliefs imposed on her by authority figures, and features moments of rebellion such as the protagonist stating that "an argument about gender is an argument about war, because that too is slavery" (Davies 2016: 00:45:38–00:45:40), in its search for realism *A Quiet Passion* more often perpetuates than challenges the Victorian outlook on gender roles. Not all gender injustices, evident to a contemporary viewer, are addressed in the film. For instance, Dickinson treats it as a matter of course that she has to seek her father's permission to stay up at night to write, later telling Sue that she is lucky because a husband would not have permitted such an extravagance. Most shocking is the double standard applied to romance, evident in the way Dickinson and her family treat, first, Emily's own infatuation with Reverend Wadsworth, and later her brother's affair. In an early scene, Emily's sister Lavinia chastises her for pining for the married Wadsworth. This happens in spite of the fact that this relationship hardly even qualifies as a romance: it is more of a one-sided infatuation. Later in the film Dickinson is again berated by Lavinia for her indignation about Austin's extramarital affair. This time, her sister chastises her for being too intolerant of human imperfections – and, surprisingly, Emily meekly accepts the truth

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of the accusation. As a result, we are presented with an image of Dickinson adhering to the patriarchal Victorian outlook, and even if it is factual, it may strike viewers as inauthentic.

Even more thought-provoking is the film's obliviousness to the now 70-year-old body of research on Dickinson's sexuality and on her relationship with her sister-in-law. In *A Quiet Passion,* Sue Gilbert appears only once in a meaningful scene with Emily; and even though it is a scene in which Sue confesses her aversion to heterosexual married life, it ends with the two women enjoying the possibility of a platonic sisterhood, filled with reading books and talking. No further scenes ever suggest a collaborative and creative, and possibly sexual relationship between Sue and Emily that can be gleaned from the edition of their letters published by Hunt and Smith. Moreover, there is absolutely no hint of Dickinson's homoeroticism in the biopic; instead, Dickinson is depicted as a spinster worried about her deteriorating looks and her resulting slim chances on the marriage market, and embittered by her loneliness (see Vanzanten 2017: n.p.). Actually, the film's representation of Dickinson's assorted infatuations and daydreams about a life partner shows her to be desperate for a male companionship. It is hard to believe that the poet who wrote 'Because I Could Not Stop For Death' would be so conventionally attached to the idea of marriage as the pinnacle of happiness and fulfilment and so blind to the dangers it would constitute for her creative pursuits. Therefore, both from a gendered and a queer perspective, Davies's biopic constitutes a conservative perpetuation of an anti-feminist, heterocentric vision of Dickinson's life.

Given that *A Quiet Passion* was written and directed by Davies, who was himself gay and did not shun from discussing his sexuality in several semi-autobiographical films, such artistic choices are surprising to say the least. Paradoxically, both the creator of the film and its audiences stress its authenticity and faithfulness in the portrayal of nineteenth-century upper-middle class life in New England. Nevertheless, in the light of existing research on the role Sue played in Dickinson's life, the omission of this character is problematic. When Rachel Handler, a staff writer for the *New York* magazine was researching a piece on the new Dickinson biopics, she reached out to Davies for comment on the issue of Dickinson's sexuality but only got an e-mail reply from his assistant, which she quotes verbatim in her article:

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> As far as Terence is concerned the only person who knew, definitively, about Emily Dickinson's sexuality was Emily Dickinson; and she may very well have been as confused and conflicted about that as we all can be at times throughout our life. [...] [T]he fact remains that we just don't know, and Terence believes that it is wrong to try and reach a 'definitive' conclusion, because that 'definitive' conclusion will always be only speculative; no matter how much circumstantial evidence one puts forward. She was what she was. An incredibly interesting human being and an astonishingly brilliant poet; the only relevance her sexuality had (or has) is how it influenced her poetry, and that we will never know. She remains, and always will be, a beautiful, unknowable, enigma … (Handler 2019: n.p., un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

The unnamed assistant, presumably relating Davies's thinking on the subject, maintains that the guiding principle behind the director's approach was adherence to the facts. As a consequence, because Dickinson's sexuality is difficult to unequivocally prove, it is omitted, as if heterosexuality was an identity assumed by default, and any other kind of sexuality had to be proven beyond any doubt. Yet, as it has been discussed above, the poet's homoerotic attachment to Sue is hardly a conjecture anymore and has been much researched by noted Dickinson scholars.

One might therefore wonder if perpetuating the dated image of Dickinson as a reclusive spinster is anything but a deliberate erasure of queer history. Davies's film lacks an awareness that contemporary biofiction tends to be revisionist. All biography is, to some extent, fiction, and it will never be able to offer a truly full picture of its historical subject. Yet, what biofiction recognises is that even speculation on what escapes biographers does not eliminate the incomprehensibility of the historical subject, which will always remain enigmatic (see Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 33). Davies's film lacks the self-reflexive urge so characteristic of biofiction, and it arguably falsifies the image of the poet by minimising the role that Sue played in her life. *A Quiet Passion* loses the chance to portray Dickinson as a relatable character rather than a heterocentric, androcentric myth. An analysis of the artistic strategy behind *A Quiet Passion* reveals that in fact it is not biofiction, but a

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heritage-oriented biopic that perpetuates the heteronormative Dickinson Myth.

5. Queering the Myth: *Wild Nights with Emily* and *Dickinson*

In 2018, only two years after the release of *A Quiet Passion*, a new biopic on Emily Dickinson appeared – and it is a powerful rejoinder to the accusation of Terence Davies "not doing his homework" (Handler 2019: n.p.). *Wild Nights with Emily*, scripted and directed by Madeleine Olnek, with the comedic actress Molly Shannon in the titular role, directly addresses the issue that Davies's biopic omitted, that is, Dickinson's relationship with Sue. Olnek's film is firmly rooted in Martha Nell Smith's work on Dickinson's epistolography,[4] taking the letters between Dickinson and her sister-in-law as its chief inspiration. Yet, in spite of weaving the current scholarship on Dickinson into her project, Olnek has been repeatedly accused of twisting the truth, as she points out in the abovementioned article by Handler:

> There wasn't a single review of *A Quiet Passion* that said, 'This is not accurate,' whereas I've gotten that a lot: 'Oh, what's this based on?' And really angry responses, like, 'She's making this up.' [...] Considering how much time I've spent researching this, and considering how many resources that movie had — there's one movie about Emily Dickinson, and they can't get it right? I feel like [the real] story has just been hiding in plain sight. (Handler 2019: n.p.)

The stubborn prevalence of the myth and the difficulty of setting the record straight in the face of almost two centuries of cover-up is addressed in Olnek's film in a remarkably self-referential and humorous way. The framing device of the film is Todd's public reading from her journal, which reinforces the Dickinson Myth. In Olnek's vision, Todd's take on Dickinson, albeit celebrated as an insider account, is supported by nothing more than Todd's own guesswork, misunderstandings, and family gossip. Todd's presentation of the mythologised version of Dickinson as a reclusive genius is contrasted with Emily's own perspective, depicted in fragmented scenes or comments in the voiceover, often in the form of quotations from her poetry and letters. The structure is non-linear, representing the fragmentary nature of historical memory.

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The crux of *Wild Nights with Emily*, as the title suggests, is to self-reflexively and humorously comment on the queer nature of Dickinson's friendship with Sue. The interspersed scenes from their teenagehood and adulthood depict Emily passionately kissing Sue, secretly meeting her for sexual trysts (and cheating on her with their school friend Kate), and in other ways debunking what Todd claims to be the 'truth' of Dickinson's life. The autotelic comment on how this relationship is seen by others is directly expressed by both characters, but ironically (and crucially), the true nature of their love escapes the readers of the poems and letters. Higginson has no idea what 'I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed' is really about, but Dickinson leaves no doubt about the sexual nature of that title, which results in a comic clash between what the initiated audience knows about the poet's sexuality and what her contemporaries fail to notice. Yet, the humour of this scene is poignantly underscored by the recognition that, for many years to come, the queerness of Dickinson's poems will be disregarded while "hiding in plain sight" (Handler 2019: n.p.).

As entertaining as the film is, its politics is single-mindedly invested in a disruption of the Dickinson Myth, and in revealing to the uninitiated audience that the reclusive spinster was actually a passionate lesbian. The screen biofiction is also engaged in a commentary on queer heritage, in which the memory of a historical figure lies in the hands of their contemporaries – resulting, at times, in erasure or distortion. Humour is applied to such self-reflexive discussion of queer heritage to undermine the myth of a heteronormative and single Dickinson. For instance, a visit from the elderly Judge Lord shows him merging two novels by the Brontës, coming up with "Wuthering Jane", and then mistakenly calling Dickinson "Jane" and suggesting that "a plain girl can be loved by a fire victim" in order to hint that he would be a good marriage prospect for her (Olnek 2018: 00:15:34). In the light of the aforementioned Brontë Myth and its connection to the Dickinson Myth, this scene turns into a humorous commentary on misrepresentations becoming part and parcel of literary fame. The fact that Judge Lord identifies Dickinson as Jane [Eyre] is a reference to the way the influential Brontë Myth affected later representations of nineteenth-century female writers, including Dickinson, merging them into a composite image of a female recluse, suffering from unrequited love to an older and/or married man. In Olnek's film, when Emily is seen by Todd holding Judge Lord, this is not perceived for what it was – an attempt to prevent an infirm older man from falling down

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– but misinterpreted as her desperate effort to seduce him and thus ensnare him into matrimony.

Olnek's film oscillates between expounding the ridiculousness of heteronormative myth about Dickinson and celebrating the profoundness of her poetry and her passion for Sue. The subversiveness of the film's humour is most evident in the portrayal of the excision of their relationship from the Dickinson Myth. Todd is portrayed as the crucial agent in the process of de-queering the poet. Olnek's comedy shows Todd as eager to achieve literary fame for herself, encouraging Austin Dickinson to publish their love letters. The fact that later, after Dickinson's death, she refuses the same recognition to Emily and Sue's correspondence is a stark reminder of the heteronormative lens through which the poet's life has been viewed for so long. The sharpest contrast is evident in the final scenes of the film. Austin gifts Mabel Todd with a scrap of paper saying 'AMUASBTEILN', which are the letters of their first names intertwined. This is an ironic reference to innumerable scraps of paper with letters and poems that Emily and Sue exchanged throughout their lives – yet Austin and Mable's little puzzle is, in comparison, ridiculously shallow and uninspired. Nevertheless, Mabel promises to "cherish it forever" (Olnek 2018: 01:19:10), while at the same time she is busily erasing Sue's name from Emily's correspondence, in the process of preparing it for publication. This is a symbolic scene, yet it is also rooted in fact, as Smith's research into Dickinson's manuscripts at Amherst College revealed them to have been "mutilated", so that "these affectionate expressions about her sister-in-law, Susan" could only be restored one hundred years later with the use of spectrographic technology (Handler 2019: n.p.). *Wild Nights with Emily* is therefore a film that, through the use of comedy, is invested in establishing a queer heritage by putting the lesbian subjects back into history, epitomised in a powerful scene after the end credits, in which Sue's name re-appears in the letters. In the light of its agenda, Olnek's project should be perceived as a neo-Victorian screen biofiction, that is, a film engaged in re-evaluating and reconstructing the queer nineteenth-century past.

The latest addition to the body of Dickinson biofiction is the Apple TV+ series *Dickinson* (2019-2021), created by Alena Smith and starring Hailee Steinfeld in the title role. Unlike the previous examples, which portray Dickinson as a mature woman, the three seasons of Apple's *Dickinson* focus on the poet's teenagehood and early adulthood. The show does not shun from Dickinson's homoeroticism and is strongly feminist and queer, depicting

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Dickinson as a rebel fighting against the limiting conventions of the period. The conservative world outlook is often mediated through the characters of Dickinson's parents. The poet's mother (Jane Krakowski) is presented as shallow, house-proud, and obsessed with marrying off her daughters, in a manner reminiscent of Mrs Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Dickinson's father (Toby Huss) is loving but strict, in the vein of a nineteenth-century family patriarch. His strong opinions about women's role in society, and in particular his belief that ladies of good family should not write or publish literature, naturally clash with his talented daughter's plans and desires. Admittedly, the conservatism of Emily's parents has been mellowed in the second and third season, which expand on their psychology and motivations and depicts their more relatable sides.

In the first season, in the portrayal of the parents and in highlighting the generation clash, the series is at its most comical and exaggerating as it adjusts Dickinson's life story to the tastes of contemporary viewers – especially teenagers, who are the series' chief intended audience. Alena Smith's *Dickinson* revels in anachronism and uses it as a strategy of breathing life into history in order to offer viewers "a transhistorical and transtemporal familiarity" (Russo 2021: 542). Smith often builds on the clash between the viewers' expectations related to nineteenth-century mores and Dickinson's spirited and thoroughly modern behaviour for comedic effect. This strategy is established in the opening scenes of the first episode when Emily reacts with irritation to her mother's request to fetch water from the well and questions the system in which the unmarried daughters of the house are expected to do household chores and receive calls from potential suitors (Green and Smith 2019: 00:01:58-00:04:18). Emily's behaviour in the first scenes of the pilot is thoroughly anachronistic. She acts like a twenty-first century teenager thrown into the nineteenth century setting, reacting with disbelief and rebellion to what would have been perfectly ordinary social expectations. The fact that *Dickinson* embraces anachronism is also evident in such staples of today's teenager-friendly costume drama as modern pop music in the soundtrack and references to current teenage culture, such as raucous parties or doing drugs when the parents are away (see Shelton, Smith and Waller 2019: 00:04:11-00:04:16, 00:11:43-00:13:40).

This irreverent mode of portraying the past recalls Sophia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), another film that tries to demythologise a female historical figure. While Coppola's use of pop music and visual anachronisms

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(such as a pair of Converse trainers in the montage of Marie Antoinette's shoe collection) was incendiary at the time and met with mostly negative reception, one of the film's notable early champions was the influential film critic Roger Ebert. His review of the film draws attention to the role and function of anachronisms, and is equally applicable to *Dickinson:*

> Coppola has been criticized in some circles for her use of a contemporary pop overlay – hit songs, incongruous dialogue, jarring intrusions of the Now upon the Then. But no one ever lives as Then; it is always Now. Many characters in historical films seem somehow aware that they are living in the past. Marie seems to think she is a teenager living in the present, which of course she is – and the contemporary pop references invite the audience to share her present with ours. (Ebert 2006: n.p.)

Similarly to Coppola's Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst), Smith's Emily Dickinson seems to be living in the "Now". As played by Hailee Steinfeld, Dickinson's body language and mannerisms are those of a twenty-first century teenager, who is progressive, rebellious, and ahead of her times. The dialogue of the younger characters is also replete with today's teenage slang and curse words. It is telling that one of the first lines of dialogue spoken by Emily in 'Because I could not stop', the opening episode of the series is "This is such bullshit!" (Green and Smith 2019: 00:01:59) – which, incidentally, is her reply to Lavinia, who passes on her mother's request that she should stop writing and bring water from the well, one of the women's chores in the household. As exemplified by this scene, anachronisms and modern swearwords in *Dickinson* serve simultaneously as sources of humour and of relatability, and as a form of feminist and/or queer commentary.

In terms of her worldview and beliefs, this version of Dickinson is simply "woke", a term used by Lavinia in the show (qtd. in Russo 2021: 545). The poet is portrayed as a staunch feminist and abolitionist. The latter comes to the fore in Season One , Ep. 5, titled 'I am afraid to own a Body', in which she presides over a meeting of a local Shakespeare Club (Howard, Smith and Greller 2019). The members decide to read *Othello,* and Emily, to the incredulity and discomfort of her friends, invites a black family servant to play the lead. In Season Two, both Emily and Austin promote abolitionism

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and support a group of Black activists (Passon and Green 2021). The series writers tread a fine line between presenting their heroine as a social justice warrior and a somewhat naïve and impulsive teenager, far removed from the mythologised figure of The Recluse of Amherst. This show's Dickinson is dedicated to her writing, to reading and daydreaming, but is also engrossed in adventures, parties, and travels with her friends and siblings, and consumed by her first romantic relationships.

While the series shows Emily's relationship with Sue as the defining love of her life, it takes a more complicated view of Emily's sexuality than Olnek's *Wild Nights with Emily*. In the second half of Season One (Ep. 6-9), Emily is in a romantic, albeit unconsummated relationship with her father's clerk Ben Newton (Matt Lauria), which causes Sue's jealousy. The entire plotline seems to be designed to subvert the blueprint for literary biopics mentioned above, by presenting a conjectural unhappy or unfulfilled love affair of the young writer and using it to explain the inspiration behind his/her later writings. Here, Emily's love-affair finds its abrupt and anti-climactic ending in Ben's untimely death (see Season 1, Ep. 10, 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain'). The love affair is portrayed (with brutal honesty) as a youthful crush that does not have a lasting impact on Dickinson's life or creativity. It should also be noted that the queer relationship depicted in *Dickinson* is presented without the lesbian/gay panic that can be seen in the examples of 1990s queer heritage cinema described by Sadoff (see Sadoff 2009: 197-243). Even though their affair is secretive, the relationship between the two women is not depicted as immoral or reproachable (see Russo 2021: 546), and the heterosexual norm in the form of Sue's marriage to Austin does not disrupt their life-long devotion to each other. Thus, *Dickinson* exemplifies a definitive shift in the way queer relationships are shown in contemporary television and cinema.

As a result of *Dickinson*'s creators' artistic choices, the series feels at times like a sitcom about unruly teenagers – albeit in nineteenth-century costumes. It makes skilful use of the generic tropes of teenage romcom, such as the conflict with parents and a tomboyish and unique heroine uninterested in dating or getting married. Whereas the audience would typically expect such a heroine to change her outlook once she finds her true mate, in a manner reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), if there is one thing that modern audience will know about Dickinson, it is that she died a spinster. In spite of this, the series plays a game with its viewers, showing Dickinson engaging in

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flirtation with eligible – or married – young men (Ben Newton in Season One, and Samuel Bowles, played by Finn Jones, in Season Two). Knowing that Dickinson will never marry, we can treat her love interests as red herrings. The unfulfilled romantic relationships with men paradoxically reinforce *Dickinson*'s queer agenda, as it is the poet's relationship with Sue that continues and flourishes in spite of these complications and distractions.

In fact, despite Emily's heterosexual infatuations, her love for Sue is the core of *Dickinson*, as underlined especially by Season Two. Most of the plot of the season charts Emily's fascination with Samuel Bowles, the editor of *The Springfield Republican*, which corresponds to the traditional claim made by biographers that Dickinson was serially and unhappily in love with some men of letters of her acquaintance. The season starts with Sue and Emily becoming estranged, initially because Dickinson's prolific writing has been 'too much' for Sue, and later also because Dickinson discovers that Samuel (a married man, who rejects her own advances) is actually having an affair with Sue, who at this point is already married to Austin. The viewers might be forgiven for assuming that Season Two has steered away from its initial queerness, if it was not for the last episode, where Sue and Emily become reunited in a sequence of passionate love scenes.

The main focus of the Season Two, however, is Emily's literary career. She has to make a decision whether she wants to be published and, ultimately, famous. Dickinson is advised against seeking fame through publication by a vision of a man who calls himself Nobody and who recites "I am Nobody – who are you? Are you Nobody too?" (Rodriguez, Smith and Zucker 2021: 00:21:48-00:21:56); yet both Sue and Samuel encourage her to seek recognition as a poet. The final episode reveals this story arc to be ultimately a queer drama: Sue admits she has brought Samuel into their lives because she became afraid of the power of her and Emily's mutual love for each other and of the profoundness of Emily's poetry (Howard and Smith 2021: 00:14:18-00:17:31). On the other hand, Samuel's insistence on publishing Dickinson's poems represents a heterosexual, androcentric urge to possess. The character exemplifies a capitalist force to commodify and appropriate Dickinson's talent, even against her will. In the last episode of the season, Samuel's refusal to accept her decision not to publish is presented as condescending: "Don't let emotions get in the way of your career, that's what always happens with women" (Howard and Smith 2021: 00:06:46); but his statement also carries threatening undertones, which make it seem like a

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metaphorical literary rape. Crucially, Bowles claims that no-one would notice the power of Dickinson's poems without him "pointing them in [her] direction" (Howard and Smith 2021: 00:07:14), and, more generally, he seems to imply that behind every woman of genius there is a man who allows her to be a genius. In this context, Dickinson's final decision not to publish her work is a queer act of rebellion against this masculine and patriarchal oppression.

The show suggests that Dickinson's obscurity during her lifetime was not a result of her shyness or eccentricity, as the Dickinson Myth maintains, nor was it due to the fact that no-one wanted to publish her, as Olnek's *Wild Nights with Emily* suggests. Instead, in *Dickinson*, the poet decides to circumvent the androcentric commodification of literary fame; and in her refusal to achieve mainstream success, she resorts to "the queer art of failure" (Halberstam 2011: 88). When Bowles tries to convince Dickinson to join him in the building of his "business empire", she vehemently turns him down and-instead chooses "an empire of the mind" (Howard and Smith 2021: 00:06:03). As her passionate closing scenes with Sue demonstrate, her empire will be a queer one. In a brilliantly comic moment in the closing sequence of Season Two, Bowles, who wrongly thinks that he has just stolen Emily's manuscripts, triumphally shouts "I am a feminist!" (Howard and Smith 2021: 00:08:35-00:08:38) – when of course he has just proven himself to be anything but. As a result, one of the most fervently emotional and topical scenes of Season Two, that of the passionate reunion between Emily and Sue, is counterpointed by humour, which allows the ideological message of this episode to resound more clearly.

In the final Season Three, *Dickinson* itself offers an apt summary of our discussion. In Episode 7, 'The Future never spoke', Emily and her sister Lavinia time travel to the year 1955. Almost a hundred years into the future, their house is abandoned and locked up, but luckily, they meet a student of the nearby Smith College for women, who happens to be Sylvia Plath. When she lets them into the building, what follows is a scene of confrontation of the Dickinson Myth with the poet herself. Sylvia Plath informs her that it is "common knowledge" that Emily Dickinson was a sad, dried-up spinster, depressed, alone, always wearing white and crying in her bedroom (Jack, Zewi and Smith 2021: 00:20:20). To Emily's protestations, Plath declares that Dickinson was infatuated with a mysterious man, although she also recalls a scandalous book published a few years before that named Dickinson a

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lesbian. Plath's remark is, in fact, a sly reference to Patterson's biography of 1951, which would be treated as an 'Easter egg' by viewers who are well-versed in the history of reassessments of Dickinson's life. In the scene's quietly ironic but historically accurate punchline, Emily admits that she does not know the term 'lesbian' but recognises herself in the description of a woman who loves other women (Jack, Zewi and Smith 2021: 00:21:06-00:21:47, 00:29:34-00:29:53).

This scene brings home the main message of the series by confronting the show's Dickinson (representing the 'authentic' historical Emily Dickinson) with the Dickinson Myth. The humour of the scene stems from the contrast between the stereotypes expounded by the 1950s Plath and what the audience knows about the 'true' Emily Dickinson after watching three seasons of the series. The viewer is encouraged to recognise that even though the language to describe sexual orientation was not yet available in the 1860s, the woman-loving Dickinson is the 'true' version of the poet. Sadly, it should also be noted that in this episode, in an attempt to question the Dickinson Myth, the series' creators resort to a very generic version of Sylvia Plath: morbidly depressed, suicidal and, at the same time, pretentious. This tongue-in-cheek sequence of an imaginary encounter between the two poets suggests that an attempt to demythologise one historical character might pave the way for mythologisation and stereotypisation of another.

6. Conclusion: To Each Their Own Dickinson

Such productions as *Wild Nights with Emily* or *Dickinson*, especially when compared to the staid and reverent *A Quiet Passion*, may seem to be attempts to sensationalise a sombre nineteenth-century writer. Because they are clearly created with an intention to make Dickinson relatable and attractive to younger audiences, other more sophisticated viewers may be tempted to dismiss them as unauthentic. But, as the above analysis shows, if we consider their post-authenticity as an act of self-reflexive and ironic demythologisation, in fact the opposite is true – while Davies's film perpetuates the Dickinson Myth, relegating Sue to the role of a minor character hardly worth a mention, *Wild Nights with Emily* and *Dickinson* recognise her key status in Emily's life as her confidante, lover, reader and agent, thus debunking the myth and replacing it with a powerful herstory of lesbian intimacy and artistry. Paradoxically, when it comes to the production of these films, *A Quiet Passion* is a testament to an attention to historical detail

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in setting, costumes, and language, while *Wild Nights with Emily* lacks comparable budget and therefore cannot offer the same realism, and *Dickinson*, while being a high-quality production, is purposefully and blatantly anachronistic. This difference, however, only underlines the demythologising power of the latter two series, bursting the myth open with queer humour and the campness of anachronism. Moreover, the difference between the budgets of these screen products – particularly of the independent *Wild Nights with Emily* in comparison to the other two – brings out the contrast in privilege and prestige entailed in these screen narratives.

As a renowned director, Terence Davies could count on a respectful reception if not critical acclaim, and thus his vision of Dickinson is admired for its poetic quality and depth, and the political charge (or lack thereof) of his biopic is not questioned. In contrast, Olnek and Smith, female creators with fewer credits to their names, would face greater scrutiny when it comes to the message of their works. Paradoxically, even though Davies himself belonged to the queer community, his biopic verges on cultural appropriation and ventriloquism, where the queerness of his subject has been omitted from the story. Released only two years later, Olnek's film addressed the problem of silencing the queer subject head on and can thus be perceived as a more legitimate appropriation of the past lives of Dickinson and Sue. The use of humour as a subversive strategy in both *Wild Nights* and *Dickinson* only underlines this problematic of recovery vs. re-silencing.

Notes

1. Susan Gilbert was Emily Dickinson's childhood friend who, after marrying her brother Austen, took the name of Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Throughout this article, we use the name 'Sue Gilbert' for the sake of clarity and simplicity (even when referring to Gilbert after her marriage) and because 'Sue' was the name used by Emily Dickinson herself in her poems and correspondence.
2. The similarities between *Shakespeare in Love* and *Becoming Jane* on the level of plot and imagery were also noted by Deborah Cartmell (see Cartmell 2013: 154).
3. *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) and its two film sequels (2019, 2022) as well as its spinoff *The Gilded Age* (2022–) were created and executive produced by Julian Fellowes.

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4. To further strengthen the film's academic credentials, the closing credits of Olnek's film dedicate it to Martha Nell Smith, "whose scholarship helped bring the relationship between Susan and Emily to light" (Olnek 2018: 01:25:42). Rachel Handler also mentions the cooperation between the film's director and the researcher (see Handler 2019: n.p.).

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