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“It’s Just a Matter of Form”: Edna St. Vincent Millay’s Experiments with Masculinity

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Abstract: Edna St. Vincent Millay occupies an uncomfortable position in relation to modernism. In the majority of criticism, her work is considered the antithesis to modernist experimentation: as representative of the ‘rearguard’ that rejected *vers libre* in favour of fixed poetic forms. Indeed, most critics concur that whilst Millay’s subject matter may have been modern and daring—voicing women’s sexual independence, for instance—her form was decidedly traditional. Millay also troubles notions of modernist impersonality by writing seemingly autobiographical lyrics that showcase feminine emotions. In this paper, I aim to challenge this view of Millay by focussing on the two avant-garde works that mark the outset and the zenith of her career: *Aria da Capo* (1921) and *Conversation at Midnight* (1937). These works are both formally innovative, blurring the boundaries between poetry and drama, causing Edmund Wilson to complain that Millay had “gone to pieces”. Moreover, both works engage in performances of masculinity, with women all but absent. *Aria da Capo*, first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1919, dramatizes the conflict between two shepherds as an allegory for the First World War. *Conversation* ventriloquises an all-male dinner party, ranging through the political issues of the Depression era and foreshadowing the war to come. I use both works to argue that Millay has a more interesting relationship to masculinity and modernism than has been hitherto captured by critics. Millay voices men in innovative ways, radically challenging constructions of both gender and poetic form in the process.

Keywords: Edna St. Vincent Millay; modernism; masculinity; lyric; drama; verse drama; gender; genre

1. Introduction: The Poet as Woman?

Edna St. Vincent Millay is insistently associated with femininity. In a 1937 review John Crow Ransom described her as paradigmatic of “the Poet as Woman” (Ransom 1937), an emphasis that endures in the scholarship on Millay produced during the last decades of the twentieth century. In a pioneering article that catalysed the revival of interest in Millay’s work in the 1980s, Patricia A. Klemans credited Millay with boldly articulating female experience: “Her poetry presents this new viewpoint to literature—the liberated woman’s view” (Klemans 1979, p. 8). More recently, critics observe Millay’s indebtedness to a longer tradition of women’s writing. Elissa Zellinger, for example, argues that Millay drew on the nineteenth-century tradition of the poetess, finding inspiration in the likes of Felicia Hemans and Frances Sargent Osgood, poets who projected idealised femininity and appeared to provide their readers with intimate access to the inner selves (Zellinger 2012). Millay’s connection to feminine poetic traditions led to her rejection by proponents of high-brow literary modernism. In contrast to T. S. Eliot’s demand to separate “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot 1999, p. 2398), Millay’s poetry seems to play on the exposure of the poet’s inner self. According to Suzanne Clark, Millay’s brand of “sentimental modernism” aims to establish emotional intimacy with readers and public audiences. The cultivation of a relatable persona played a crucial role in forging

this connection, but also damagingly linked Millay's work to popular culture and poetic traditions that were disparaged as out-dated and irredeemably feminine in an era dominated by "dry and hard" masculinised modernism (Hulme 1994, p. 66).

Intensifying these issues, Millay's use of traditional forms sets her apart from her modernist peers who were experimenting with free verse. Her aptitude for fixed forms—especially the sonnet—combined with her recurrent themes of love and death led her to be compared to her "sister bards, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Alice Meynell" (, p. 97). Relishing rather than railing against the "corset of form" (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, p. 113), Millay took a decidedly different path to female modernists such as H.D., Marianne Moore and Mina Loy. This combination of gender and genre means that Millay occupies an uncomfortable position in relation to modernism, which is still regarded as the dominant poetic mode of the early twentieth century (despite being only one among a plethora of poetic trends in that era). In the majority of criticism, Millay's work is considered the antithesis to modernist experimentation. Indeed, most critics concur that whilst Millay's subject matter may have been modern and daring—voicing women's sexual independence for instance—her form was paradoxically traditional.

But Millay's champions have urged that rather than judging her on modernism's terms, we re-interrogate modernism in light of her work. If Millay represents the suppressed other of modernism, what does this suggest about modernism's limitations? How might reading Millay's work on its own terms open up her poetry to different evaluations and perspectives? Celeste M. Schenck, for example, proposes that we question our assumptions regarding form, particularly the equation between "radical form and radical politics" (Schenck 1989, p. 231); an equation that continues to endure in recent scholarship on twentieth-century women's poetry.¹ She suggests that conventional forms do not always represent conservative politics, constriction and restraint, and can be used ironically by women poets to knowingly critique such ideas. Gilbert and Gubar concur that Millay's use of the sonnet form is often tongue-in-cheek: "a kind of archaic costume in which the rebellious poet sometimes seriously, sometimes parodically attired herself to call attention to the antique garb of femininity" (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, p. 113). They view Millay's ironic use of form in line with her hyper-feminine self-fashioning or "female-female impersonation."

The present article seeks to build on this work, but also to add another angle to these debates regarding gender and genre—one that more fully reflects Millay's published output in its complexity. I want to trouble the notion that Millay's work is consistently concerned with femininity and is formally un-experimental, by showing how she engages in interrogating masculinity in works that are also stylistically innovative. In the process, Millay defies gender and genre boundaries in ways that trouble our received critical perception of her oeuvre, with wider implications for twentieth-century poetics. For, as Susan Rosenbaum has recently argued: "The opposition between experimental and conventional forms does not adequately account for the history of twentieth-century women's experimental poetry" (Rosenbaum 2016, p. 332). Whilst male modernists are largely associated with free verse, Rosenbaum points out that "experimental women poets have often made use of conventional forms such as lyric and epic", in the process creating "generic hybrids" such as "poetic novels, verse novels, prose poems, poetic theatre" (p. 332). Such experiments, moreover, often provide "commentary on patriarchal traditions and history" (p. 332). All of these statements are certainly true of Millay, although she is not mentioned in Rosenbaum's essay.²

¹ For example, Cristanne Miller's "(Women Writing) The Modernist Line" discusses how H.D., Marianne Moore and Mina Loy's "deployment of a new poetic line was compatible with larger (often feminist) goals of their poetics" (Miller 2016, paragraph 4).

² Millay is mentioned in Melissa Girard's excellent essay from the same volume "Forgiving the Sonnet: Modernist Women's Love Poetry and the Problem of Sentimentality" (Girard 2016) but this once again has the effect of foregrounding her shorter, fixed-form poems over her longer, generically hybrid works.

In this article, I will challenge the received view of Millay as female-focussed, feminine and formally unexperimental by focussing on the two avant-garde works that mark the outset and the zenith of her career: *Aria da Capo* (Millay 1921) and *Conversation at Midnight* (Millay 1937). These works are both formally inventive, blurring the boundaries between poetry and drama, causing Edmund Wilson to complain (in the case of the latter) that Millay had “gone to pieces” (Wilson 1993, p. 81). Moreover, both works engage in performances of masculinity, with women all but absent from the cast. *Aria da Capo*, first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1919, dramatizes the conflict between two shepherds as an allegory for the First World War. *Conversation* ventriloquises an all-male dinner party, ranging through the political issues of the Depression era and foreshadowing the war to come. I use both works to argue that Millay has a more complicated relationship to masculinity and modernism than has been hitherto captured by critics. Millay voices men in innovative ways, radically challenging constructions of both gender and poetic form in the process.

2. A Man Speaks: Millay’s Early Experiments in Masculinity

Although raised in a family of women, Millay’s masculine identity was subtly embedded in her very name—St. Vincent—in honour of the hospital where her uncle Charlie was nursed from a life-threatening fever in 1892, the year of her birth (Milford 2001, p. 17). Millay’s grandmother noted of the new baby that “Nell [the nickname of Millay’s mother, Cora] would have called it Vincent if it had been a boy” (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 18). As matters turned out, Millay was the closest thing her family had to a male heir. Her father abandoned the family at a young age, and, the eldest of three daughters, Millay grew up to be her mother’s favourite, signing her letters “your devoted son” (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 255). Despite her reputation for hyper-femininity, Millay did not restrict her experiments with masculine identities to her private correspondence. She played on the ambiguity of her name from the earliest stages of her career. “E. St. Vincent Millay” shot to fame with the publication of “Renaissance” in *The Lyric Year* in 1912. Many assumed that this celebrated debut was by a male author. Impressed, the poet Arthur Ficke engaged in a correspondence with the young poet. On hearing of her true identity, he replied that “No sweet young thing of twenty ever ended a poem precisely where this one ends: it takes a brawny male of forty-five to do that” (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 79). Millay replied flirtatiously: “I simply will not be a ‘brawny male’. Not that I have an aversion to brawny males: au contraire, au contraire. But I cling to my femininity!” ([5 December 1912] Millay 1952, p. 20).

Despite her protests, Klemans observes that “the most frequent comments made about Renaissance was that it was unbelievable that it was written by a young woman” (Klemans 1979, p. 10). It was not just Millay’s name that contributed to this impression, but the poem’s sense of literary inheritance. Clark highlights how Millay draws on masculine American transcendentalism: “Readers of Millay in 1912 could still hear masculine resonance to the Emersonian or Whitmanian ‘I’ constructs by certain key phrases and moments of ‘Renaissance.’ The daughter puts on the father’s garb, their vocabulary, their form” (Clark 1991, p. 87). As her career developed, Millay’s “cross-dressing” was not limited to poetic emulation. Earning a place at Vassar as a direct result of her celebrated debut, she relished playing male roles in college plays, using these costumes to intensify the romantic attention she received from fellow students. A 1915 letter to her family following her role as the poet Marchbanks in George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida* is imbued with a sense of cross-gendered identification: “I felt perfectly at home in the clothes. People told me I reminded them of their brothers the way I walked around and slung my legs over the arms of chairs, etc. [. . .] Somebody thought I was really a boy” (quoted in Epstein 2001, p. 92). Millay continued to enjoy donning masculine garb throughout her career (see Parker 2016). In this sense, Millay can be read alongside other twentieth-century writers who expressed a sense of sexual inversion through their diverse experiments in self-fashioning and aesthetic innovations, such as Radclyffe Hall, Gluck, and Bryher (see Doan 2001 and Funke 2018).

This sense of sexual inversion is further inflected by Millay’s use of a cross-gendered poetic voice, a technique also employed in other modernist works by women which exhibit cross-gendered

ventriloquism.³ Millay developed this voice through her early reading practices. In their focus on Millay's femininity and female speakers, critics such as Zellinger neglect to mention that Millay's avowed poetic influences were male. In a conversation with Walter Adophe Roberts (editor of *Ainslee's* magazine) Millay explained her belief that "it was impossible for a poet not to be influenced by the work of those he venerated as artistic ancestors—that it was in fact desirable, for it assured a continuity and development of the general stream of poetry" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 174). Asked about her own influences, she acknowledged A. E. Housman and Alfred, Lord Tennyson as her primary inspirations. Millay had been familiar with these poets from an early age; the collected works of Tennyson sat proudly on the bookshelf in her childhood home and she studied Victorian poetry whilst at Vassar. In a letter of October 1922, she excitedly recounts spotting Housman in Cambridge and following him down the street (Millay 1952, p. 161). These influences permeate an early poem, "Interim," in which a bereaved speaker addresses a dead beloved, beginning:

The room is full of you!—As I came in
And closed the door behind me, all at once
A something in the air, intangible,
Yet stiff with meaning, struck my senses sick! (Millay 2011, p. 14)

These opening lines echo Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: "But thou, that fillest all the room/Of all my love" ("CXII" (Tennyson 2009, p. 277)). Other Tennysonian echoes resonate through the poem; for example Millay's vision of an empty embrace: "That day you filled this circle of my arms/That now is empty. (O my empty life!)" (p. 17) recalls Tennyson's famous lines:

Tears of the widower, when he sees
A late-lost form that sleep reveals,
And moves his doubtful arms, and feels
Her place is empty, fall like these ("XIII", p. 211)

While Millay's speaker declares: "You were my flower!" (p. 21) Tennyson's laments: "I lost the flower of men" ("XCIX", p. 267) and both poems use imagery of the seasons to contrast the thriving natural world with the stalled heart where "Dark, is all I find for metaphor" (p. 21) and "all is dark where thou art not" ("VIII", p. 208).

Millay's poem has long puzzled critics due to the ambiguous identity of the speaker. "Interim" was originally published in the *Vassar Miscellany* in July 1914 accompanied by the epigraph "A Man Speaks." An early draft was preceded by "The Widower Speaks" (echoing *In Memoriam*). However, in the 1917 version (in *Renascence and Other Poems*) it was published without these epigraphs, lending a greater sense of gender ambiguity. Should this poem be read as a dramatic monologue, a lyric elegy or something between the two? Daniel Mark Epstein claims that Millay was persuaded by her writing tutor at Vassar to add the "Browningesque stage direction 'A Man Speaks'" (Epstein 2001, p. 47). With reference to Millay's early draft of the poem written in September 1911, he argues that the poem is a more personal outpouring than this epigraph would suggest, asserting that the mourned subject of "Interim" is "the poet herself [. . .] the poem is Vincent's formal farewell to and expression of grief for the girl (herself)" (p. 48). He notes details in the poem that resemble Millay's own life: "We know the book, the table, and the room very well. This is a picture of Vincent's own bedroom and secret diary" (pp. 47–48). Mary K. Stevens, in her 1947 thesis, anticipates this biographical interpretation, linking it to the poem's meandering, diary-esque form: "It is probably a faithful recording of a young girl's

³ Diana Collecott discusses Amy Lowell's "masculine impersonation" in her love lyrics (Collecott 1992, p. 101) whilst Margaret Homans has explored her cross-gendered ventriloquism of Keats (Homans 2001). H.D.'s use of Swinburne and other Pre-Raphaelite and decadent poets to forge a gender-fluid homoerotic voice has been discussed at length by Cassandra Laity (Laity 1996). Beyond poetry, Sarah Hayden has discussed Djuna Barnes's use of a cross-gendered voice in *Nightwood* (Hayden 2012).

reactions to death, but it gives rather the impression of unselective notation than of the composition which is characteristic of the poetic imagination" (Stevens 1947, p. 78). Though there may be elements of psychological insight to such readings, these autobiographical interpretations rather problematically imply that Millay is incapable of writing a poem that is outside of or beyond the self, and thus play into the stereotype of the self-effusive 'poetess' unfolding her heart to readers. Could we instead consider that the imaginary occupation of a male speaking position was a genuine and enabling experiment for Millay, opening up new possibilities of expression in her work?

Rather than stabilising the poem's meaning, Millay's use of a male speaker complicates potential readings of the poem in relation to gender and sexuality, moving beyond heteronormative conventions. For Tennyson and Housman's elegiac poems are of course part of a tradition of male homoerotic writing. In speaking as a bereaved male, Millay's cross-gendered ventriloquism troubles assumed heterosexual desire. Notably, the gender of neither the speaker nor the addressee is revealed within the poem, despite the fact that critics repeatedly refer to the dead beloved as female. As we have seen, Tennyson's speaker refers to himself as a "widow," using the language of heterosexual marriage to honour his loss. In a comparable manner, we could also potentially read "Interim" as voicing homoerotic desire through a mask of heterosexual bereavement. Reviewing Millay's *The Buck in the Snow* in 1928, Maxim Newmark subtly suggests a Sapphic element to her elegies:

As far back as *Renascence*, we have the beginnings of certain beautiful attachments. [. . .] The same minor key has sounded since from her every subsequent volume of poetry, in the form of elegies from young girls who have died. [. . .] One volume is even dedicated by name to a young girl companion who had died. [. . .] "Interim" comes nearest to the feminine "Thyrsis, or "In Memoriam" than any other long poem of a like nature ever written by a woman. (Newmark 1928, p. 20)

In connecting "Interim," "Memorial to D.C." (written for Dorothy Coleman, a fellow Vassar student who died in the flu epidemic of 1918) and "Evening on Lesbos," Newmark draws affinities between the male homoerotic elegies of Arnold and Tennyson and the celebration of "certain beautiful attachments" between women ("In a Minor Key" was incidentally a poem by Amy Levy, the late-Victorian poet whose work expresses lesbian desire and who plays with ambiguity of the lyric I/you in a similar way to Millay).

Millay therefore uses the male speaker of "Interim," subtly filtered through Tennyson, to develop her own poetic voice and to practice expressing different forms of desire. The gender ambiguity of the lyric "I" and "you" enables a fluid meditation on loss, desire and creativity—for the poem is as much about the writing process as it is about bereavement ("Here, let me write it down! I wish to see/Just how a thing like that will look on paper!" p. 19). Due to this slippage, we can read the poem simultaneously as a dramatic monologue spoken by a man; as expressing heterosexual, male homoerotic and lesbian desire; and as an elegy for a lost aspect of the self. This very ambiguity led the majority of reviewers to regard the poem as a failure. In her otherwise positive review of *Renascence*, Harriet Monroe prefers the title poem and the shorter lyrics to "Interim"; John Hyde Preston thought the poem was too long. In 1918, Louis Untermeyer used "Interim" as an example of "Why a Poet Should Never Be Educated." In contrast to the fresh "naïveté" (p. 29) of Millay's work before Vassar, Untermeyer claimed that university education had made her too "sophisticated" and imitative: "In 'Interim' we see the intrusion of foreign accents; echoes of other dramatic monologues disturb us" (Untermeyer 1993, p. 31). Untermeyer evidently felt that that the poem was derivative, wearing its Victorian, masculine influences too clearly on its sleeve. Millay's adoption of a male voice—those "foreign accents"—make her poem disturbingly polyvocal, whilst also disrupting the girlish authenticity that Untermeyer and others desired to see reflected in her work.

This is just one early indication of how Millay's career was policed by the critics who helped to launch her, as they endeavoured to preserve her in the image they preferred: feminine, fresh, young; a "brilliant child" in one reviewer's words (Anderson 1993, p. 37). This image morphed into that of the naughty girl-about-town with the publication of Millay's second volume *A Few Figs from Thistles* in

1920, as she graduated from Vassar to Greenwich Village. This volume is largely responsible for the (erroneous) enduring conception of Millay as a flapper who wrote teasingly flirtatious lyrics about her own love life. However, this book was shortly followed by *Second April* (1921), a volume that showcases a range of voices, including male-inflected ones (such as the speakers of “The Poet and His Book” and “The Beanstalk”) in a similar manner to *Renascence*. These poems remain relatively under-discussed in contrast to the supposedly female-voiced poems of *Figs*. Nonetheless, some critics were perceptive enough to identify the performative quality of *all* of Millay’s speakers, male and female. In his 1921 review of *Figs*, Frank Ernest Hill noted “the dominance of the dramatic in almost everything that Miss Millay has done” (Hill 1993, p. 35). Even in seemingly “confessional” pieces, Millay kept up a pose: “These lyrics are, in fact, dramatic monologues in which the author is spying upon herself” (p. 35). This dramatic quality is little surprise when one recalls that Millay was a playwright as well as a lyric poet. In the following section, I will explore how her play *Aria da Capo* develops her experiments with performing masculinity, as a means of critiquing the absurdity and devastation of the First World War.

3. “It Is an Ugly Game”: *Aria da Capo*

Millay’s experience acting and playwriting at Vassar prepared her for her career on the stage in New York. She moved to Greenwich Village in November 1917 alongside her sister Norma, who was also an actress. The sisters’ apartment was conveniently located near MacDougal Street, the home of the Provincetown Players. This independent theatre collective, led by George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, was established in Provincetown, Massachusetts in 1915 and, relocating to the Village in 1916, quickly became well-known for its experimental one-act plays devised by local writers. Millay joined the group as an actress in 1917 and in December 1919, contributed a play entitled *Aria da Capo* to a bill that also included plays by Djuna Barnes, Eugene O’Neill, and Wallace Stevens. This 1919–1920 “Season of Youth” marked a period of increased modernist experimentation in the productions of the Provincetown Players. *Aria da Capo* is considered by many to be the “best piece of non-representational theatre the Provincetown Players produced” (Murphy 2005, p. 143). Millay herself described it as “a peach,—one of the best things I’ve done” in a letter of November 1919 (Millay 1952, p. 90).

The structure of *Aria da Capo* takes its cue from the title, a musical term that means “from the top” (i.e., repeat from the beginning). In keeping with this cyclical A-B-A structure, Millay’s play begins and ends in exactly the same manner: with the commedia dell’arte characters Pierrot and Columbine dining at a table piled high with luxurious foods. The play opens with Columbine declaring: “Pierrot, a macaroon! I cannot live without a macaroon!” to which Pierrot replies: You are *so* intense! . . . Is it Tuesday, Columbine? —I’ll kiss you if it’s Tuesday” (1921, p. 5). The play continues in this farcical manner, as Millay satirises the absurdities of modernist art and bohemian fads; the sort of movements that attracted the Villagers themselves. For example, Pierrot plays at the idea of being a painter, envisaging Columbine as “six orange bull’s-eyes, four green pin-wheels,/And one magenta jelly-roll,— the title/As follows: *Woman Taking in Cheese from Fire-Escape*” (p. 7)—a clear jab at Cubism. The pair move rapidly through artistic crazes, from atonal musical compositions to the latest fashions. Millay even includes a joke at her sister’s expense, when Pierrot says Columbine would make a great actress because she is blonde and has no education (a fitting description of Norma Millay, who played Columbine in the original production).

Abruptly interrupting this absurd “Harlequinade” is an interlude of pastoral tragedy featuring the shepherds Thyrsis and Corydon. The scene is directed by Cothurnus, a lofty allegorical figure representing tragedy, who instructs but does not partake in the action. While the shepherds begin by good-naturedly discoursing about their sheep, Cothurnus prompts them to play a game that involves constructing a wall between them (represented by flimsy crêpe paper drawn across the centre of the stage). Tensions swiftly build as Thyrsis has all the water on his side, and Corydon discovers buried jewels. Neither will share their resources and they become increasingly suspicious of each other: “THYRSIS: It is an ugly game./I hated it from the first. How did it start?/CORYDON: I do not know . . . I do not know . . . I think/I am afraid of you! —you are a stranger!” (p. 22). The episode culminates in

the shepherds murdering each other. Cothurnus covers their fallen bodies with the dining table and Pierrot and Columbine re-enter the scene, resuming the dialogue from the start the play, but with the shepherds' corpses barely concealed beneath the table. As Cothurnus instructs them: "play the farce. The audience will forget" (p. 35).

As several critics have observed (including McKee 1966, Gilmore 1995 and Murphy 2005), the play's allegory expresses Millay's pacifist views in response to World War I. Early reviewers picked up on the play's symbolic meaning. For example, Alexander Woollcott, the formidable theatre critic for *The New York Times*, suggests that despite its potential obscurity (he likens the play to Browning's *Sordello*), bereaved mothers will immediately understand its critique of war: "Very likely it will pass over the heads of the average unthinking audience, but [. . .] surely no such mother will quite miss the point of *Aria da Capo*" (Woollcott 1993, pp. 40–41). However, whilst Millay could have written a realist play explicitly condemning the war, her experimental fable conveys her point more powerfully. The play's innovative structure and non-naturalist techniques are inseparable from its pacifist message. For example, the "absurdly circular plot structure" (Bay-Cheng and Cole 2010, p. 47) means Pierrot and Columbine's vapid excesses take on new, devastating meaning as the return to comedy underscores the inevitable repetition of cycles of violence. Contradicting Millay's reputation for formal traditionalism, *Aria da Capo* is strikingly experimental, a meta-theatrical "modernist bricolage," the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy radically unsettling genre (Murphy 2005, pp. 143–44). It is regarded by many as Millay's most modernist work, and has earned her a place in anthologies of modernist drama, while her poetry is often neglected in equivalent anthologies of modernist verse.

However, this does not mean that Millay entirely dispenses with poetic convention in *Aria da Capo*. The play draws on the well-established forms of commedia dell'arte (originating in the sixteenth century), pastoral (drawn from Theocritus and Virgil) and Greek and Roman tragedy. Moreover, it is most accurately categorised as a verse drama, a form that enjoyed considerable popularity during the nineteenth century (poets including Byron, Shelley, Swinburne, Browning, and Tennyson tried their hands at verse drama, not to mention female practitioners Joanna Baillie and Michael Field), before being 'revived' by T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry in the twentieth century. Millay's work pre-dates this revival, connecting late-Victorian verse drama with its modern manifestations. While Millay's language in the play is at times sparse and disjointed, she also uses flowing blank verse rhythms and antiquated syntax, as in the lines: "What say you, Thyrsis, do they only question/Where next to pull?—Or do their far minds draw them/Thus vaguely north of west and south of east" (pp. 15–16). Millay experimented with Shakespearean-style verse drama in her play *The Lamp and the Bell*, while her earlier *Two Slatterns and a King* is composed in rhyming couplets (both 1921). Her distinctive mixture "of archaism and modernism" was noted by Harold Shipp in his review of Millay's *Three Plays*, collected together in 1928 (Shipp 1928, p. 279).

Much like her earlier poem "Interim" then, Millay's plays blur the line between lyric and dramatic poetry, creating a generic hybrid. The sense of *Aria da Capo* as *poetry* sometimes gets lost in criticism that focuses on its dramatic qualities in performance, at the expense of its poetic qualities on the page. This means that it is often read outside of the context of the rest of her works; as an anomaly in her oeuvre. But my contention is that Millay's earlier lyrical works such as "Interim" enabled her to develop her range of dramatic and poetic voices, necessary for effective verse drama. Furthermore, *Aria da Capo* uses the hybrid verse-drama form to ponder and critique masculinity in a related way to her earlier work. Thomas Fahy notes that the juxtaposition of the farcical commedia love scenes with the pastoral battle highlights affinities between gender relations and war relations: "Love as a kind of war game—with physical and psychological casualties—provides another connection between the two narratives of *Aria da Capo*" (Fahy 2011, p. 20). Pierrot and Columbine's flippant yet heartless relationship could certainly be read as a subtle critique of gender relations in Greenwich Village. His statements that "I am become/A painter, suddenly,—and you impress me" (p. 7); "I am become/A pianist. I will image you in sound" (p. 8) and "I am become/Your manager. [. . .] I'll teach you how to cry, and how to die./And other little tricks [. . .] You'll be a star by five o'clock . . . that is,/If you will

let me pay for your apartment" (p. 9) all position him as the artist and controller of the image, and Columbine as the exploited, passive muse (and mistress). Millay certainly knew a number of men who tried to cast her in this role, and despite all its claims of liberation and 'free love,' the Village harboured its own unequal gender dynamics (for example, 'free love' licenced male promiscuity without always acknowledging the serious consequences of pregnancy and child-rearing for the women left behind).

Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole draw comparisons between Millay herself and the figure of Columbine: "By exaggerating Columbine's feminine wiles in the play, Millay suggests that femininity (perhaps her own) is always a performance constructed for a particular audience" (Bay-Cheng and Cole 2010, p. 48). But *Aria da Capo* also shows that *masculinity* is also a performance—and a particularly destructive one. Pierrot, the shepherds and Cothurnus are all shown to be destructive forces. While Columbine exhibits some dawning concern for the dead shepherds: "How curious to strangle him like that,/With colored paper ribbons" (p. 34), Pierrot simply calls for the bodies to be taken away: "We can't/Sit down and eat with two dead bodies lying/Under the table! . . . The audience wouldn't stand for it!" (p. 35). His apathy and appetite allow the scene to play out over and over again, even if he is not actively involved in the violence. Meanwhile, Cothurnus dictates lines from his "high place in back of stage" (p. 14), symbolising "the propagandistic forces that manipulate human behaviour" (Fahy 2011, p. 11). Both men are not directly violent themselves, but their posturing and inaction enables violence to take place. Thyrsis and Corydon are child-like figures whose petty squabbles escalate at an alarming rate. Millay thus draws parallels between children's games and the paranoia that leads to devastating conflict. In a similar manner to Virginia Woolf's critique of male imperialism, *Three Guineas* (1938), *Aria da Capo* firmly connects greed, imperialism and violence to masculinity via games and rituals. As Pierrot explains at one point: "It's just a matter of form" (p. 10).

However, Millay did not let women off the hook entirely. Her later libretto for *The King's Henchman* (1927) is also a fable of masculine conflict. But here, Millay portrays a beautiful male friendship (the King Eadgar and his loyal henchman Aethelwold) torn asunder by a manipulative woman, Aelfrida. Millay's play shows that women can be threatened by male homosocial love, being invested in the idea of conflict and competition between men (in which women function as the ultimate prize). However, critics were unimpressed by Millay's ventriloquism of masculinity in this play. In a piece entitled "Stand Back, Pretty Lady," Henry Seidel Canby criticises Millay's voicing of men: "She cannot do a man as Shakespeare could do Juliet or Cleopatra. [. . .] *The King's Henchman* is the tragedy of the neurotic woman [. . . giving] us woman's loves in man's guises" (Canby 1993, pp. 55–56). Canby not only regards Millay's men as inauthentic, he also questions her right to voice men at all. Comparing Millay unfavourably to Shakespeare, Canby implies that Millay lacks the expansive imagination (or 'negative capability') that would enable her to get under a male character's skin, in the way that Shakespeare can with his female characters. Moreover, Millay's cross-gendered ventriloquism marks her as a "neurotic woman," acting out her own strange impulses through male characters. This negative response is similar to that prompted by Millay's early poem "Interim." Once again, critics and reviewers urge this "pretty lady" to stand back and stick to articulating the experiences of women who resemble herself. But when she *did* do so, Millay was charged with a narrow, self-absorbed vision— what one reviewer called a "preoccupation with her own emotions and flesh" (The World of Poetry 1941). But such criticism did not deter Millay from voicing masculinity and in 1937, she constructed her most ambitious performance of cross-gendered ventriloquism—the multi-layered, all-male verse dialogue *Conversation at Midnight*.

4. '[T]he Certain Voice/of an Uncertain Moment': *Conversation at Midnight*

In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression and increasing political tensions across America and Europe, Millay began writing the poem that can be classed as her most formally experimental work. Sections of the poem were originally published in the November 1935 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. Then, in 1936, disaster struck. The complete manuscript of *Conversation at Midnight* was destroyed

in a hotel fire during her stay at the Palms Hotel in Florida. As she recounts in her Foreword, the poem was reconstructed from memory, along with “new poems written within the last year” (1937, p. vii). Milford describes the volume as a departure: “Conversation at Midnight was unlike anything she’d ever written. It was an audacious piece of work, intellectually provocative, colloquial, funny, and cloaked in a masculine voice” (2001, p. 404). However, as we have seen, rather than a sudden shift, Millay had previously experimented with male voices and hybrid poetic forms in her earlier work. However, *Conversation* exceeds these attempts in its ambition and range—both in terms of its intellectual engagement and the diversity of poetic forms through which these ideas find expression.

This 122-page, four-part poem takes place in present-day New York, at an all-male dinner party hosted by Ricardo, a liberal and agnostic. His seven guests from across the political and social spectrum include Merton, a Republican stock broker; Carl, a communist poet; Pygmalion a sardonic writer for popular magazines; and Anselmo, a Roman Catholic priest. As the evening progresses the conversation meanders across topics including hunting and fishing, women (including misogynistic rants about women drivers and overly-sentimental wives), religion and faith, propaganda, politics and even—bizarrely—mushrooms. The poem privileges no single perspective over another; the fluidity of debate and one-upmanship propels the dialogue. In the process, Millay dissects different manifestations of masculinity in modern society as these various male ‘types’ critique one another through the prism of their own vulnerabilities. For example, Carl launches an attack on Merton’s establishment masculinity:

You, Harvard Club, Union Club, white tie for the opera, black tie for the theatre.
Trousers legs a little wider this year, sir, [. . .]
Why, you’re so accustomed to being flanked right and left by people just like yourself
That if they ever should step aside you couldn’t stand up! [. . .]
You, an individual?
You salad for luncheon, soup for dinner,
Maine for summer, Florida for winter,
Wife-pampering dog-worshipper! (1937, p. 117)

Merton responds by accusing Carl of representing “the death of everything I care for” (p. 115). The irony is that neither is an individual as they are both so deeply identified with their respective causes (capitalism and communism).

From the opening references to hunting with “cocked” guns (p. 1), the poem echoes *Aria da Capo*’s commentary on the masculine thirst for violence. With the possibility of war in the air, Pygmalion relishes the opportunity:

One thing I do know: there’s lots of men that love a fight;
And war—don’t you see—it takes them out of their rut. [. . .]
I know what you mean, I get you all right, but—well—
It’s good for a man now and then to get away from his wife,
No matter how much he may love her; and anyway, hell!—
I never had such a good time in my life!
You say we’re in for another: it looks to me not.
But if we did get into another, I’d go like a shot. (p. 38)

Meanwhile, Ricardo laments that “War is man’s god; he has but one” (p. 38). However, men are portrayed as the victims as well as the perpetrators of violence. Ricardo refers to the psychological damage of World War I: “the shell that does not blow the head,/Into unsuspected fragments, makes none the less its furrow in the brain” (p. 37). The poem hints at the pressure that attends man’s conventional role as bread-winner when Merton recounts the story of a father that commits suicide so his family can get the insurance money: “he’d spent the last thirty years/Providing for ‘em, and I supposed it seemed the only way/To keep on providing: insured right up to his ears,/ [. . .] carbon monoxide; found/Dead in his car in the garage” (p. 63).

By the final section, midnight strikes. At this significant hour, the poem reflects on the current political moment. When John, a painter who laments the loss of religious faith, imagines the “whole round world rolling in darkness [. . .]/Not a mortal soul can see his hand before his face” (p. 97), Pygmalion replies:

I bet you Mussolini gets the outline of his own iron glove
Even in the dark, damn well. And the outstretched paw
Of Hitler is a handsome blob of white to him
No matter what time it is. (p. 97)

In this image, Millay evinces that the only certainty in the Godless “darkness” belongs to the despots. In contrast to her doubting, confused male speakers, Hitler and Mussolini have a sense of purpose, implying that they will dictate the course of future events. Millay’s poem uncannily foreshadows the war to come. These escalating tensions are also captured in the narrative, which almost ends in a fight between Merton and Carl, with Pygmalion urging: “Let ‘em scrap it out! Come on, all hands,/Let’s take up the rugs before the crimson pool expands!” (p. 119). Before the party can erupt into *Aria da Capo*-esque violence, Ricardo concludes the evening: “Have pity upon a nervous host, opposed/Not only to fascism, but also to war” (p. 119). This anti-climax suggests a pause rather than a cessation of violent tensions.

Conversation is diverse not only in topic but in style. The poem is composed of a stunning variety of forms, ranging from free verse to formal sonnets. In her Foreword, Millay makes clear that: “The differences in metrical style [. . .] are an aspect of the book as first planned” (1937, p. viii), rather than a result of the poem’s reconstruction. While it might have been tempting to assign certain characters specific forms to reflect their different attitudes (structured sonnets for the conservative, cultured Merton, for instance), *all* characters participate in this democracy of styles and move fluidly between them. In this way, Millay shows that they participate in a shared culture and influence one another’s rhetoric, however inadvertently. She also avoids potentially prioritising one viewpoint over another through (an implicitly hierarchised) division of forms. The volume is peppered throughout with sonnets, such as “‘I want to talk,’ said Lucas, ‘about love!’” (p. 45) or Carl’s “‘It’s true I honour the dirt; that’s perfectly true’” (p. 66). But Carl also speaks in imagistic free verse, as in the haiku-esque: “Old men, you are dying!/Winter will find you scattered like sparrows over the snow;/Neat little sparrows, folded and stiff on the snow” (p. 114). Many passages are, in Millay’s words, “metrically free and freely rhymed” (p. viii), such as Pygmalion’s speech about war (cited above) which employs loose iambic/anapaestic pentameter and cross-rhymes before concluding in a suitably blunt final couplet. Metre and rhyme throughout is playful and flexible, capturing the rhythms of a lively conversation. Millay uses line-length to humorous effect in the “As Ogden Nash might put it” (p. 47) section, in which the men complain about women’s behaviour:

And they’re always saying “Now don’t interrupt me!” and always interrupting, and they
can’t
let anything drop.
And they insist of telling long stories, which they do very badly, because they never know
what to leave out or where to stop. (p. 48)

These comically elongated lines with delayed end rhymes mimic the alleged conversational habits of women, but also show men are capable of speaking in the same way. As Susan Gilmore argues, Millay’s “nested series of impersonations” renders *all* dialogue as pastiche, denaturalising both femininity and masculinity through poetic performance (Gilmore 1995, p. 189).

In the poem’s final scene, the speakers bid each other goodnight. In contrast to the rest of the poem, the voices are unassigned, free floating on the page as fragmented, unidentifiable utterances. Thus, at *Conversation*’s conclusion, Millay further breaks down the divisions between the characters, suggesting that their various differences are meaningless as they disappear into the night. As well as

collapsing stylistic boundaries, *Conversation* is generically hybrid. It is often categorised as a verse drama, though the original blurb proclaims it “a sequence of poems.” Millay explains that: “It would be better to [. . .] think of it in terms of a play” (p. viii). That said, it is difficult to categorise *Conversation* straight-forwardly as a drama, due to the occasional interjections of the narrator (for example, “Merton was angry,” p. 57) and the fact that Millay lists “First Lines” in a section at the back, implying that these can be read as discrete poems. In keeping with her earlier “Interim” and *Aria da Capo*, the text blends lyric and dramatic elements in an innovative, genre-defying mix. Through its poetic diversity, *Conversation* collapses “conventional divisions between public rhetoric and personal lyric” (Newcomb 1995). Millay’s speakers engage in public debate but also express their personal desires and fears; she employs her oft-praised gift for the ‘personal’ lyric in the service of wider political engagement.

Millay’s radical troubling of boundaries of genre, poetic style and gender unsurprisingly provoked negative criticism. These aspects unsettled the image of Millay that reviewers had enshrined earlier in her career. As Harold Orel summarises: “The gist of their comments was that Miss Millay, *their* Millay, had no business with bastardized form” (Orel 1993, p. 167). This sense of ownership imbues Edmund Wilson’s review, in which he laments that Millay has “gone to pieces” (Wilson 1993, p. 81). In violation of her “old imperial line,” in *Conversation*: “you see metrics in full dissolution. The stress is largely neglected; the lines run on for paragraphs; sometimes the rhymes fade out. Sometimes poor little sonnets, [. . .] flutter into the all-liquifying flux” (p. 81). This horror of fluidity encodes misogyny: male modernists such as Pound and Hulme often expressed disgust at the soft, wet “slop” that they associated with feminine chaos. Pound, for instance, associates Amy Lowell with “slop” in his letter to Alice Corbin Henderson of March 1917 (Pound 1971, p. 108). Complaining that Millay’s metrics were too “loosened,” Wilson manages to simultaneously downplay her agency by ascribing her “erratic metrics to the play’s status as a reconstructed text” (Gilmore 1995, p. 189) and prefigure the ageism that characterises his response to her in the 1940s: “She had become somewhat heavy and dumpy, and her cheeks were a little florid. [. . .] I noticed for the first time a certain resemblance to her mother” (Wilson 1952, p. 784).

Other reviewers found Millay’s cross-gendered ventriloquism deeply disturbing. Untermeyer attacks the poem on these grounds: “For some occult reason she has chosen to express herself like a man” (Untermeyer 1937, p. 6). In a particularly excoriating passage, he portrays Millay as an eavesdropper who is too ignorant to fully comprehend what she has overheard:

Miss Millay pretends to flash light on a man’s world, but it is still the world of a child — a sensitive, angry, confused child who has heard (or rather, overheard) scattered arguments which she tries to reassemble and join. [. . .] She is not a thinker though she tries hard to be one; she is intuitive, not intellectual. (p. 6)

By eavesdropping on a “man’s world” that is beyond her understanding, Untermeyer suggests Millay only succeeds in confusing herself. However, his reference to her as a spy, illuminating the male world with a “flash light” betrays his anxiety that she may, after all, have overheard something significant. This image of Millay as eavesdropper and voyeur occurs in other reviews: “Miss Millay has either been behind the curtains at several of the more intellectual stag parties or she has a most observing informer” (Blake 1938, p. 42). Here, the uncanny accuracy of Millay’s observations is acknowledged. Is the male critic’s anger partly due to a sense of being found out, caught in the act; not misunderstood but understood too well? Untermeyer and his fellow reviewers may be uncomfortable due the way in which Millay dissects masculinity. Her ventriloquism “implies that ‘maleness,’ because imitable, is neither fixed nor natural” (Gilmore 1995, p. 184). Her poem thus exposes masculinity as culturally constructed and vulnerable to analysis. Moreover, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has recently argued, citing Barbara Johnson on Baudelaire, male modernists revelled in their “right to play femininity” (DuPlessis 2014, p. 20)—to adopt feminine voices and gender-fluid

guises in their experimental poetic works.⁴ However, the same flexibility was not afforded to their female peers: “A key structure of maleness in modernism deployed the feminine, the effeminate and masculinity in various ways, yet tried to narrow or obliterate female claims to similar and parallel materials” (DuPlessis 2014, p. 28). In adopting a startling variety of male voices then, Millay defiantly violates the strictures placed on women poets’ expression, showing that women are equally capable of transgressing the boundaries of gender and genre.

To return to Untermeyer’s response, his remarks suggest that Millay has, like a wayward child, transgressed into spaces where she has no right to be, and has irresponsibly publicised her observations. Women’s exclusion from centres of power and intellect was still very much a reality. In 1937, the same year that *Conversation* was published, Millay received an honorary degree from New York University. However, she later learned that she had been excluded from a reception for male recipients. As she wrote to the Secretary of the University; “I am, solely for the reasons of sex, to be excluded from the company and the conversation of my fellow-doctors. Had I known this in time, I should have declined [. . .] I beg of you [. . .] that I may be the last woman to be so honoured, to be required to swallow from the very cup of this honour, the gall of humiliation” (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 403). Here, as in her long poem, Millay refuses to be shut out of the conversation, defiantly claiming a voice in the dialogue.

Despite the mixed critical reviews, *Conversation at Midnight* was widely acknowledged as an important book and was reviewed by over a hundred periodicals. When a poll in the *Saturday Review of Literature* asked: “What books of 1937 do you nominate for this year’s Pulitzer Prize awards?” Millay’s poem won by a long-shot, being nominated by fourteen out of thirty-seven reviewers, when “No other book received more than four votes” (Newcomb 1995, p. 278). Peter Monro Jack in the *New York Times* considered it “an imperative book of the year, in or out of poetry” (Jack 1993, p. 76). He compared it to other long experimental poems such as Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Pound’s *Cantos* (1925), Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (1930), and Auden’s *The Orators* (1932). Despite this, the fact that Millay’s work has been completely neglected by studies of the modernist long poem reflects the triumph of those reviewers who sought to stifle her mature career. As John Timberman Newcomb has shown, Millay’s politically-engaged work was dismissed by critics who sought to shape the canon along New Critical lines. But Millay’s continuing exclusion also speaks to the limitations of our own critical frameworks. *Conversation at Midnight* deserves to be recognised as important long poem both inside and outside of modernism. Through her experiments with gender, form and genre, Millay galvanises innovative, modernist techniques in the services of “social dialogue” rather than “alienated individualism” (Newcomb 1995, p. 269), showing experimental twentieth-century poetry to be capable of immediate political engagement, not just detachment. The poem is also relevant to our own historical moment; its skewering of patriarchal bombast, hypocrisy, and political disenfranchisement unfortunately resonates as strongly today as it did in 1937.

5. “Men Working”: Millay’s Poetic Labour

One of the poems published posthumously after Millay’s death in 1950 is entitled “Men Working” (in *Mine the Harvest*, 1954). In this poem, the speaker compares male labourers erecting an electric light to the “movement of girls about a May-pole” (2011, p. 532). In a similar manner to *Conversation*, Millay eavesdrops on the men’s conversation and presents it via unmediated scraps of dialogue rendered in fragmented free verse:

The grounded pikes about the rising black pole, beautiful.
 “Ed, you’d better get under here with me!” “I’m
 Under!”
 “That’s it!”

⁴ DuPlessis cites Barbara Johnson’s argument that Baudelaire’s poetry enacts “male privilege as the right to play femininity” (Johnson 1998, p. 127).

“Ground your pikes” (pp. 532–33)

Comparing the men’s work that of “coloured ribbons weaving,” Millay draws affinities between feminine ritualistic dancing and the unified movement of the men as they work together, asserting that the men’s labour is ultimately “more beautiful” (p. 533). In doing so, she collapses gendered divisions between the ancient and the modern, nature and technology, art and industrial labour. Millay’s poem implicitly weaves parallels between the “men working” and her own creative labour—erecting the pole and writing poetry both require “skill/And the balance, both of body and of mind” (p. 533). It is likely that the poem was written in the late 1940s, when electricity was finally installed at Millay’s rural estate, Steepletop. As the men work to bring modernity and illumination to her retreat, one may speculate that Millay was sitting in her writing cabin, watching and listening to them as she worked. The poem captures her admiration for the men’s co-operation and determination to fix the (feminised) pole: “In the front of each man’s mind: ‘She’s going to go/Exactly where we want her to go’” (p. 534). Rather than viewing this as a fantasy of patriarchal control, Millay notes the men’s “respect for the pole” (p. 534). This single-minded determination recalls her own sonnet “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines/And keep him there,” also written in the 1940s. Both the men’s labour and the act of poetic creation require patience, fortitude and respect for one’s materials. Millay thus equates male industry and female art, figuring the “beauty” of masculinity as creative and co-operative, rather than merely destructive. In this post-war poem, the conflicts of *Aria da Capo* and *Conversation* are re-cast as harmonious camaraderie, showing that Millay’s fascination with masculinity continued to develop.

I want to conclude by suggesting that a focus on Millay’s female-voiced lyrics means we have neglected the range and variety of her poetics, and its engagements with both form and gender. But rather than trying to argue Millay *into* modernism, I have endeavoured to show that putting poets firmly into categories—such as ‘experimental’ or ‘non-experimental’—often creates a distorted impression of their wider oeuvre. This impression is unfortunately supported by the kind of work that gets anthologised. Millay’s sonnets are readily anthologised but her longer verse poems are difficult to reproduce in this manner. This makes it all the more vital that we seek out and critique this work. The narrative of modern poetry must accommodate Millay in all her range—both her female-voiced lyrics and the politically-engaged, generically hybrid work that I have discussed here—if it is to accurately capture the diversity of poetic engagements with matters of gender, genre, form and politics in the twentieth century.

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