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Cheryl Walker
Scripps College

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Chapter 8

Antimodern, Modern, and Postmodern Millay: Contexts of Revaluation

Cheryl Walker

A recent catalog of the J. Peterman Company advertises a “storm blue” pleated skirt with “smoked-pearl buttons” called simply *Millay*. The introductory narrative about this skirt is typically Petermanesque—that is, romanticized, hyperbolic, imperial, full of pirouettes and winks—but it is also suggestive of something real: a turn back toward this early twentieth-century poet that remembers her in ways both old and new: “Did you forget how beautiful Edna St. Vincent Millay was?” it begins. “I didn’t. She lived in The Village in a house only 9 1/2 ft. wide. Then on an island off Maine. Often seen in a skirt like this. Looking wonderful. So will you. Wearing old riding boots, a heavy sweater, or the thinnest crepe blouse.”¹ The idea that Edna St. Vincent Millay can be used to sell clothes in the 1990s—that is, that she is still (or once again) a resonant figure in an age of postmodernism—is more than a sign that *fin-de-siècle* culture is afflicted with nostalgia. Somehow it is fitting that the first American woman poet to become a full-fledged media figure should re-emerge in an era given to the overlapping presences of antimodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. In fact, Edna St. Vincent Millay was always a complex figure—part vaudevillian, part Latinist—both in and out of the tidal pools of literary history. Now her protean persona seems appropriate again in a world where Hillary Rodham Clinton and Madonna share the cultural stage and where literary values seem in perpetual motion.

In this volatile atmosphere, there are numerous signs that a rehabilitated Millay is poised to resume a position in the canon she was forced to vacate in the late thirties and forties. For example, a recently released college textbook—*The Heath Introduction to Poetry* (1992)—chooses only two poets for its section on “The Sonnet”: William Shakespeare (who is

represented by twenty-seven sonnets) and Edna St. Vincent Millay (represented by twenty). In this college textbook—and such books, we must remember, constitute an important site of canonization—Millay assumes the “representative” role that canonical figures are so frequently asked to play, as when, in the English literature survey course for instance, a selection of Wordsworth’s lyrical ballads stands in for Romanticism and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* sums up certain modernist principles. Here Shakespeare speaks for the English Renaissance (male) and Millay for American modernity (female), a point to which I will return later.

For the *Heath* volume editor, Joseph DeRoche, Millay’s work “shows how the form evolves as well as coils back to its Petrarchan origins.”² She pays homage to the past while heralding a world undreamt of by Shakespeare, a world of “subways and cigarettes.” This, too, suggests a positioning of her work within the rubrics of the canon, for those who enter the canon must always be seen as continuous with “the great tradition” and yet disruptive of some aspects of its legacy. Though DeRoche argues that her sonnets evoke “Petrarchan origins,” he also claims: “Millay’s sonnets display the obvious changes in language, syntax, metaphor, image [that have occurred over time]; they are clearly modern, closer to us in temper and testament, in scheme and skepticism. The scenes and imagery of Millay are obviously closer to us, heralding the ending of the 20th century and anticipating the beginning of the 21st.”³ Now this is very interesting, it seems to me, because in a few sentences we go from the Italian Renaissance and Petrarch to a “clearly modern” Millay (who might be seen as firmly situated in the twenties and thirties) and then on to a transitional (postmodern?) presence who heralds the end of the twentieth century and anticipates the beginning of the twenty-first.

This sweep of time certainly accords the poet a different directional velocity from the one allowed her in even so recent a text as Jan Montefiore’s *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), where Millay is said to follow “appropriately from Shakespeare in that her poetic approach is traditional in a straightforward sense. The experiments of Modernism passed her by; despite the freedom and colloquialism of her later work, she uses mainly Romantic conventions.”⁴ Montefiore sees Millay as living out Wordsworth’s (and Edmund Wilson’s) belief that “poetry is the articulation of a straightforward subjectivity”;⁵ thus, she is hardly modern at all, let alone postmodern. For Montefiore, Millay makes few demands upon the reader and thus can provide “pleasure” but no real challenge.

However, change is in the air. New readings of Millay’s work from a variety of critical perspectives—formalist, new historicist, biographical, psychoanalytic, feminist—are calling into question the notion that Millay is simply transparently pleasurable. At the Skidmore Conference in

1992 ("Millay at 100"), which celebrated the centennial of the poet's birth, we heard a number of papers arguing for a different—more difficult, less "straightforwardly subjective"—Millay. Furthermore, when Nancy Milford's monumental biography of Millay is released (a section of which we heard read at the Skidmore Conference), readers will be asked to struggle with conflicting stories and contradictory evidence, making the biographical subject (Millay) one with the epistemological quandaries of the late twentieth century.

New volumes of the poetry have been published recently, in particular, Colin Falck's *Selected Poems* (1991) about which more will be said later. In 1986 Harper and Row brought out a stunning compilation of poems with black and white photographs by Ivan Massar called *Take Up the Song*. And a further sign of Millay's resurrection is that Films for the Humanities and Sciences has recently added to their Twentieth-Century American Literature Series an hour-long video called "Edna St. Vincent Millay: Renaissance," the only *new* video not to focus on a contemporary writer. (The others concern Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Susan Sontag, August Wilson, John Wideman, and Charles Johnson.)

Does all of this renewed interest in Millay require us to rethink the principles upon which the canon has been traditionally based? Does Millay's reentry force us to "reconfigure the contexts and history of modern or postmodern poetry," as an early proposal for this volume of essays phrased it? Or, alternatively, have new contexts of evaluation, new readings, made possible a return of Edna St. Vincent Millay that leaves the principles upon which the canon is based essentially unchanged? In other words, which comes first: the poetry itself—its nature and contexts implicit in the texts—or the critical apparatus that allows us to situate the poetry in the literary present (or not, as the case may be)? To put it *most* succinctly: Does the poet change literary fashions or do literary fashions change the poet?

As you may have already surmised, my answer to this question is not in doubt. I think that literary fashions change the poet, and in what follows I will argue that we are no longer reading the same Edna St. Vincent Millay once read by Edmund Wilson. But how did this happen? In subsequent sections of this essay I will briefly examine the trajectory of Millay's reception up to the present period, then investigate the three different Millays—antimodernist, modernist, and postmodernist—who are presently receiving attention, and finally look (again briefly) at Millay's representation in college anthologies, which are often guideposts to the way a poet is being read and taught. Ultimately I want to argue that whether a poet becomes central to literary study has less to do with the "quality" of the poetry, that elusive essence, than with complex cul-

tural factors that allow us to situate the poems in familiar and reusable contexts.

If Gertrude Stein, H. D., Marianne Moore, Laura Riding, Elizabeth Bishop, and Muriel Rukeyser seem central to us today, they did not seem so in the memorable past, though critics were not unaware of their work. Gwendolyn Brooks and Edna St. Vincent Millay are the great exceptions in this volume because they have always been widely read but their readers have not always been academics. Having won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950, Gwendolyn Brooks established her reputation early and never lost it, but her readership was largely African American and white populist up to 1975; she was not much taught in modern (or contemporary) poetry courses and in fact does not even appear in the *Pelican* guide to American literature (1988), which is an index to the kind of elite cultural perspectives that govern the canon.⁶

Then again, Edna St. Vincent Millay does not appear in the *Pelican* guide either (though Gertrude Stein, H. D., Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Muriel Rukeyser do). Since the Second World War, Millay's reputation has been under a cloud. In 1944 Winfield Townley Scott wrote that "the greatest insult you can offer any young woman poet in this country is to warn her that she be the Edna Millay of her generation; which, being interpreted, means that she is in danger of glibness and of popularity."⁷ What happened to this poet who was once so firmly established that Thomas Hardy could say America had made only two great contributions to the culture of the twenties: its architecture and Edna St. Vincent Millay?

There is no question that Millay was considered the most important woman poet in America for many years. Her reputation grew from the early moment when "Renascence" was *not* chosen as the best poem submitted to *The Lyric Year*, an anthology that ran a competition for poets in 1912. Though Millay, who was only twenty at the time, did not win first or second prize, her poem was published in the anthology and became an overnight sensation. *Renascence and Other Poems* appeared in 1917 and the poet's career was launched. As she continued to publish book after book throughout the twenties and thirties, she was widely reviewed and generally highly praised. Hailed as the greatest woman poet since Sappho, her work was read by both men and women—A. E. Housman claimed he got more pleasure from her poetry than from that of either Edwin Arlington Robinson or Robert Frost—and many tried to imitate her lyric gift.

However, the strength of her critical reputation was destined to wane in the late thirties as academic criticism, heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot, came to dominate the literary scene. In an excellent study of Millay's

reception called “Poet as Persona: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Problems of Representation,” Jo Ellen Green Kaiser describes the change in critical weather that began the process of raining on Millay’s parade:

By the late 1930s, however, the world-view which “Renaissance” offered was no longer understood to be representative. Instead, the strengths of “Renaissance” become reinscribed as Millay’s weaknesses, as in a review from 1939 by critic Seldon Rodman, who laments that Millay is “still rearing towers to Beauty, still uneasily celebrating the ‘honesty’ of her ‘anguish,’ the incandescence of her thought.” Rather than being representative, Millay’s attempts to describe the “limits of experience” are now understood as being personal, a *presentation*, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, of Millay the person “who suffers,” rather than a representation by Millay of the “mind which creates.”⁸

The disciplining of English studies and their incarceration within the walls of academe led to an even greater marginalizing of poets like Millay who had once had mass appeal. (For an extended discussion of this, see Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery*.)⁹ Critics increasingly defined their project as one of uncovering buried meanings rather than judging trans-historical value, which to previous generations seemed the crucial task. As every Millay scholar knows, John Crowe Ransom wrote a scathing attack upon the poet of *Fatal Interview* in an essay entitled “The Poet as Woman,” published in 1937.¹⁰ Here he identified the quality most important for a woman of talent—intellectuality—and found Millay (like most women, in his judgment) wanting. Ransom and Allen Tate, both associated with universities rather than with the New York world of publishing that had dominated criticism in the twenties, were part of the new nerve center of the literary world located on campuses and in elite journals rather than in urban public spaces—bars and offices—or in pamphlets and “little magazines.” Both were influential in downgrading Millay’s reputation.

Kaiser asks: “Why did [later] critics continue to read Millay as a sentimental, feminine personality of the twenties who could not adapt to the political, masculine, public emphasis of the thirties, when we have seen that Millay did in fact refashion herself to become representative of her age? The answer may lie in part in the notable divergence between elite and popular evaluations of Millay’s later career. Millay clearly lost her high culture currency by the forties.”¹¹ The final nails in Millay’s critical coffin were hammered in with her radio broadcasts in support of America’s entry into the war and her publication of the propaganda poems in *Murder of Lidice* and *Make Bright the Arrows*. Though Susan Schweik has recently turned a much more sympathetic eye on these poems in her book *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War*,¹² the critical reception of them at the time was mostly chilly. Millay was

seen as, once again, sounding off about her feelings rather than analyzing the structural components of the political impasse. She died in 1950 and, again according to Kaiser, "After a spate of essays summarizing her career, Millay is mentioned only intermittently [in the *MLA Bibliography*] through the fifties, sixties, and seventies; most of the essays published on her appear in the *Colby Library Quarterly*, then a modest journal primarily devoted to Maine writers."¹³

New writers were coming into prominence in this period, writers who offered more to graduate students in search of intellectual nuts to crack. Bette Richart published an essay called "Poet of Our Youth" in *Commonweal* in 1957 reflecting this change of fashion.¹⁴ Though Richart had loved Millay as she was developing her own talents as a writer, she now saw her as primarily an adolescent enthusiasm, preferring the far more restrained and obviously challenging poems of Marianne Moore. Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore were both beginning to move to the center in this period. As Daniel Hoffman describes this shift: "From the time her first booklet, *Poems*, appeared in 1920, Miss Moore had been a poet whose idiosyncrasies secured her only the most discriminating of audiences. Eliot had introduced her *Selected Poems* in 1935, but it was her *Collected Poems* (1951), published when she was sixty-four, that brought fame and, for the first time, a wide public."¹⁵

It is worth noting in Kaiser's and Hoffman's respective descriptions of Millay's fall from grace and Moore's rise to prominence that these shifts in popularity were not governed by what we might call, hypothetically, "the poetry itself." Millay *had* changed, but critics continued to see her as the same poet she was in the twenties. Conversely, Moore had *not* substantially changed, indeed had a full corpus of work behind her, but the *Collected Poems* of 1951 suddenly gave her a readership that many of the individual poems contained in that collection had not done at an earlier period.

Perhaps to notice this does nothing more than add support to Stanley Fish's old point that texts are the product of "communities of readers" rather than fixed entities in themselves. However, this point can seem benign, even delightful, when it is thought to refer only to the endless possibilities for reinterpretation implicit in each poem. When we turn instead to the exclusionary effects of literary fashions on a poet, say, as talented as Edna St. Vincent Millay, the instability of the text as it is buffeted by the winds of change has its darker side. The last decade of Millay's life was certainly plagued by her sense of this slippage. According to Edmund Wilson, when he visited her at Steepletop (her country house near Austerlitz, New York), Millay seemed desperate to reinforce her belief in the power and substantiality of the text to withstand the destructive force of time. Though clearly in very bad psychological shape (and

probably relying upon both alcohol and drugs), she read “The Poet and His Book”—a work about the transfiguration of the poet’s body as the poem—in a highly emotional voice: “Read me, margin me with scrawling, / Do not let me die!”¹⁶ For many years this plea seemed to fall upon deaf ears as Millay’s work went out of fashion and Millay herself was remembered mainly as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a poet.

Now, however, there are signs of a return of the repressed. The reasons for Millay’s reemergence are no doubt extremely complicated and one cannot do much more here than suggest a range of factors that may be part of this overdetermined change of perspective. Not to be ignored, it seems to me, is the presence of women faculty influenced by feminism in the graduate English programs, which have always included a good many female students but which have only recently been receptive to projects on women writers such as Millay. As we saw at the Skidmore Conference, there are quite a number of talented young faculty and graduate students currently working on Edna St. Vincent Millay at such places as Brown, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Washington, and the University of California, Berkeley. It hardly needs restating that when graduate students work on a writer, a market for material about that writer develops. Articles and books may be published by them down the line; courses begin to appear, creating a ripple effect and, again, a market for new texts. Since poetry is read mainly within the academy, academic attention is the key to critical recognition. Graduate students become professors and teach undergraduates and eventually it is no longer necessary to argue for the value of a writer’s work. She has, for all intents and purposes, entered the canon.

These are merely instrumental factors, however. Culturally, too, we are at a point at which Millay might once again appear relevant. This is not due to the uniformity of cultural configurations, however, but to their diversity. For instance, many in the academy feel resentful about the way critical theory and cultural studies (feminism, multiculturalism, and gay and lesbian studies in particular) have taken over what used to be the department where universal values and the techniques of prosody were taught. Though Millay offers rich opportunities for those interested in early twentieth-century American culture, she is also a poet who took form very seriously. Her poems advocate “universal values”—which she herself believed in—and they are models of formal elegance (as the *Heath Introduction to Poetry* recognizes in choosing her sonnets to juxtapose to Shakespeare’s). One reading of Edna St. Vincent Millay casts her, in her use of traditional forms, as a kind of antimodernist (a bulwark to those who find Cultural Studies arid) but one who may still appeal to students due to the modern settings and themes of her poems.

Feminism, however, is undoubtedly the single most important cultural

factor in the return of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, probably the most broadly influential of American feminist critics, began the Millay revival by including an essay on her work in their 1979 anthology *Shakespeare's Sisters*, and they have continued to keep the poet before the eye of the feminist reading public by drawing attention to her in all three volumes of *No Man's Land*, their magisterial reassessment of literary modernism.¹⁷ (The third volume includes an entire essay on Millay.) Earlier Gilbert published a piece on her as a "female female impersonator," available in the new *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay* edited by William Thesing.¹⁸ In their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), which is in the process of being revised, they wrote: "despite the obscurity into which her work fell in the fifties and sixties—decades when former acolytes like [Sylvia] Plath and [Anne] Sexton felt it necessary to repudiate her as an old-fashioned 'poetess'—Millay's art has endured and seems, sometimes, surprisingly fresh: indeed, not too long ago one prominent editor remarked that her *Childhood Is the Kingdom* reads like 'a twenty-first century poem.'"¹⁹ Note again the projection of Millay's work into the twenty-first century, signaling a momentum propelling her toward the future.

As a modern (as opposed to an antimodern) poet, Millay can be reconstructed along many lines, not just those of feminism. For New Historicists and cultural critics, her life-text is a gold mine. She lived through two world wars, supporting conscientious objectors in the first and advocating military engagement in the second. She picketed in favor of Sacco and Vanzetti and was accused of being a Communist sympathizer. She advocated free love. Many of the cultural currents of the early twentieth century ran through her life. Perhaps this is why her book-length dramatic poem *Conversation at Midnight*, which is rich with discussions of politics, consumerism, art, and advertising, is now being reappraised as a fascinating document of the 1930s. Her antiwar poetry and her propaganda poems have also found new readers among people preoccupied with the political conflicts presently erupting around the world.

In contrast to the comparatively well-established interest in Millay as a modernist, her postmodern potential has only recently begun to appear. Yet with even a superficial knowledge of the poet one can see where she might fit in to contemporary schools of postmodernism. Performance and spectacle were her calling cards. She wrote for the theater and acted in a number of productions herself. Furthermore, rumor has it that we will soon know quite a bit more about her relations with various lesbian communities in New York and Paris. Indeed she never denied that she had bisexual tendencies, for all that her love life seemed to be made up of one male lover after another. Flirting with cross-dressing and possessed of a male name ("Vincent"), she became famous for the butch

suits in which she was photographed. In fact, her bodily image—multiply constructed as ultrafeminine and androgynous—was an important component of her public persona. (Note, for instance, the first sentence of Paul Engle's 1956 essay called "A Summing-Up of Her Work": "What is untrue of most poets was beautifully true of Edna St. Vincent Millay—her poems were as well-turned as her own slim ankle."²⁰ Though this association may strike us in the nineties as more than a bit demeaning, Millay herself exploited the possibilities of using her physical presence as a form of art. She was always "on"—except, that is, when she was visibly "off" and out of control. In many ways Edna St. Vincent Millay might be seen as the Judy Garland of American women poets: passionate, vulnerable, and campy. Even in her fifties she could seem, like Garland, childlike and jaded at the same time.

In contrast to other women poets of her day, such as Louise Bogan, Marianne Moore, and H. D., Millay's persona never really gelled, and it has thus been hard to locate the poet and her work definitively. This, of course, makes her a prime candidate for the decentered subject of postmodernism. It also opens her work to psychoanalytic investigations by readers who apply the ideas of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, central figures in literary psychoanalysis of a postmodern kind. In some ways the very fact that Millay herself resisted the influence of psychoanalysis makes her work *more* accessible to such readings rather than less. By comparison, Louise Bogan's direct address of psychoanalytic issues in poems such as "The Sleeping Fury" and "Psychiatrist's Song" impresses one as modern rather than postmodern.

In each of these contemporary approaches to Edna St. Vincent Millay—the formalist (antimodern), the modern, and the postmodern—certain poems emerge as significant that were not frequently addressed before. Or, in the case of "Renaissance," for instance, new readings transform the text so completely that it seems an entirely new work.

Let us take these three Millays one at a time, beginning with the formalist. Perhaps it is not strictly accurate to connect contemporary formalist accounts of the poet with antimodernism per se. Two critics who come to mind as centrally concerned with Millay's use of form are Colin Falck (the editor of the new Harper's centenary edition of the *Selected Poems*) and Debra Fried. Both insist that Millay did more than simply reuse traditional forms—both see her as modern in a sense—but both acknowledge that part of the pull of her poetry is against the tide of facile modernity. Falck insists:

Her use of traditional forms, for example, is often deceptive: for all the poems where she seems to fall into pastiche (as in some of her sonnets, or some of her Housmanish early quatrains), there are others where she is engaged in some-

thing rather more subtle. The interplay between the grand manner and the artless-conversational is essential to much of her work (it first shows itself in "Renaissance"), and it enables her, as it also did later poets like Auden or Philip Larkin, to give the traditional forms a new lease of credibility.²¹

Like many a critic steeped in the "great tradition," Falck respects Millay as a lyric and philosophical poet whose flashes of insight and control of form mark her as one of the preeminent poets of the age. After quoting the closing lines of "New England Spring, 1942," Falck concludes: "Nothing like this exists anywhere else in English poetry, unless it be in others of Millay's later poems" (*SP*, xxviii). Let me also acknowledge here that Falck first drew my attention to "Winter Night"—a poem otherwise neglected—with its mysterious and musical final lines:

The day has gone in hewing and felling,
Sawing and drawing wood to the dwelling
For the night of talk and story-telling.

.
Here are question and reply,
And the fire reflected in the thinking eye.
So peace, and let the bob-cat cry.

(*SP*, 81)

Falck enjoys these lines, as do I, because of the sheer pleasure of hearing their sound patterns; the sudden shift from cosy fire to wildcat outside is also pleurably uncanny. In sum, the delights of Millay's work to which Colin Falck draws attention are those of the traditional English poem, and he is scathing about "academically-inclined critics who have interested themselves only in poetry which presents verbal and intellectual complexities that can be discussed in professional articles or in the seminar room" (*SP*, xxix). Thus, he can be seen as arguing for an antimodernism of sorts, though he calls his essay "The Modern Lyricism of Edna Millay." In keeping with his fundamentally formalist view, a feminist criticism that focuses on oppositional politics also makes him uncomfortable, as we can see by the criticism he levels at Sandra Gilbert in his introduction.

In contrast, Debra Fried's concern with Millay's use of form makes a feminist point. In her "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets" (which won the 1986 *Twentieth-Century Literature* prize in literary criticism), Fried argues that Millay's use of the sonnet was a bold stroke in the pursuit of freedom rather than a capitulation to male tradition or a necessary checkrein for overwrought emotions. Not surpris-

ingly, Fried has a lot to say about Millay's late sonnet "I Will Put Chaos into Fourteen Lines," in which, she claims, "Millay makes enjambment positively sexy."²² Carefully comparing sonnets by Keats and Wordsworth with others by Millay, she argues that Millay's use of form makes a point different from theirs. Whereas Wordsworth turned to the sonnet to get away from too much freedom, Millay saw women as threatened with various forms of entrapment, including those hidden in modern clichés about sexual freedom. "By identifying the sonnet's scanty plot of ground with an erotic grove of excess, turning the chastity belt of poetic form into a token of sexual indulgence, Millay invades the sanctuary of male poetic control with her unsettling formalism in the service of freedom, a freedom that can, as the lovers learn in 'Not with Libations,' turn into another kind of entrapment" (Fried, 243). Thus, Fried sees Millay turning the tables on male tradition and asserting a countermeaning instead.

But even Debra Fried concedes that Millay "was called upon to uphold the tradition of binding lyric forms against the onslaught of what her supporters saw as a dangerously shapeless modernism" (235). Thus, in many ways the Edna St. Vincent Millay who emerges from Debra Fried's analysis is an antimodernist because the particular strategy Millay is said to have employed to make her modern feminist points was a response to the past and a reinvigoration of traditional forms. Her analysis of "I Will Put Chaos into Fourteen Lines" focuses particularly on the sonnet's final lines:

Past are the hours, the years, of our duress,
 His arrogance, our awful servitude:
 I have him. He is nothing more nor less
 Than something simple not yet understood;
 I shall not even force him to confess;
 Or answer. I will only make him good.
 (SP, 153)

Though elsewhere Fried finds Millay deploying the sonnet form in order to assert her mastery of it, here Fried equivocates: "The tug of line against syntax figures the poet's constant struggle with 'Chaos,' not the assurance of Miltonic authority, or the comforting sense of respite and accomplishment Wordsworth claims to derive from the sweet order of sonnet constraints" (239). Millay chooses to confront tradition directly rather than seek (vainly, according to Fried) to elude its force. Fried concludes: "Her sonnets reshape those [patriarchal] myths with the revisionary force of a woman poet who, *however rearward in the phalanx of modernism*, recognizes that she has inherited a genre laden with figura-

tions exclusive to a male poetic authority, and who knows that her adaptations of that genre must engage those very myths and figurations that would bar her from the ranks of legitimate practitioners of the sonnet" (243, emphasis added).

Yet, even these formalist critics give us a somewhat different Edna Millay to consider from the one beloved by readers in the twenties, whom John Hyde Preston in 1927 called "a sensitive spirit on a romantic pilgrimage through an over-sophisticated civilization."²³ The formalist must argue craftsmanship, intentionality, and control whereas Millay got more credit in an earlier period for spontaneity and an ardent temperament, as if her finely crafted lyrics were simply the effusions of a highly tuned sensibility.

It is worth noting, therefore, that in contrast to the craftswoman we see in formalist criticism, the "modern" Millay tends once again to be less an example of intentionality and control than a figure through whom certain cultural scripts were memorably articulated. Here we find the feminist, the political activist, and, simply, the "woman writer." In Suzanne Clark's study of the divorce between modernism and the "sentimental," entitled *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*, Millay's unhappy case represents the consequences of disciplining modernism away from authorial biography and personal feeling, a disciplining that Clark sees as resulting in Millay's loss of prestige. In arguing for the present importance of Millay, Clark does not insist upon her craftsmanship or her ability to realize her intentions in verse but instead upon the "difference" of her attempt to replay the old conventions and thus conjure back into view the exiled maternal. Deeply influenced by French theory, Clark deemphasizes the importance of Millay's conscious feminism here, preferring instead to locate her value *for feminism* as intertextual. "Her struggle provokes our awareness of the contradictory status of the woman author, whose authority, as [Teresa] de Lauretis emphasizes, comes from a masculine literary language. Her status, then, depends not on any absolute literary value but on a criticism which extends its interest to the difference that gender makes in literature."²⁴

Clark does provide new readings of texts, however, and most notably of "Renaissance," which under her scrutiny does not offer the heart-warming affirmation of universal values it suggested to earlier readers. Nor does it represent Edmund Wilson's apotheosis of heterosexual love. Instead, Clark sees "Renaissance" as articulating the problems of the woman poet forced to renounce the maternal matrix of woman-identified pre-Oedipal feeling in favor of the patriarchal symbolic. She says: "In 'Renaissance,' the speaker, in what begins as a kind of romantic experience with nature, is soon overwhelmed by the natural intimacy.

The encounter makes the speaker recoil, leads to burial in a womb/tomb, and the rebirth of the subject involves an escape from an engulfing, undefined female body, as from the immersion (underground) in nature. The anxiety of influence is not Oedipal but is related to the ambivalence of being a mother's daughter."²⁵

In my own treatment of "Renaissance" in *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, I also see it as a drama about the predicament of the woman writer, also invoke French psychoanalytic theory with its discussion of the Imaginary and see the speaker at the end as forced to submit to the Law of the Father. However, I see the Imaginary in the poem less as the domain of the maternal matrix than as the realm of the sorceress. "In the first place, though the speaker is herself a victim of violence, she also seems to cross a dangerous boundary where aggression and seduction constantly change places. This is the realm of the sorceress."²⁶ Like Suzanne Clark, whose work I did not know at the time I wrote this chapter, I too felt that Millay's example was compelling less because she was able fully to realize her intentions than because her work allowed unconscious material to filter through.

Other critics who wish to reclaim Millay for modernism do credit her with deliberation and control, however. In "Female Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality" Sandra Gilbert emphasizes Millay's conscious manipulation of the roles of femme fatale and embodied woman poet. Discussing the arch and ironic poems in *A Few Figs from Thistles*, Gilbert comments: "These early verses, which made the poet notorious, function as wittily feminine manifestations of the New Woman's new determination to be free. Celebrating sexual liberation, they reveal this self-assertively sexy and consciously feminist young female author's determination to revel in 'modern' woman's unprecedented erotic autonomy."²⁷ Similarly, in discussing "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree"—possibly the work by Millay most widely admired by critics today—Gilbert sees the poet brilliantly exposing a woman's view of problems in marriage: "Besides dramatizing the tedium of this woman's life . . . Millay explores the origins of wifely bitterness, recounting how youthful eroticism had forced the young woman into a bad marriage. Significantly, indeed, it is only when the husband dies that he becomes a figure of tragic dignity and, indeed, an icon of new life for his widow."²⁸

Contemporary readings of the modernist Millay's political poetry may equally focus on her skill in creating indictments of her time or on her imprisonment within the disempowering frames of culture. Susan Gilmore's essay "'Poesies of Sophistry': Impersonation and Authority in Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Conversation at Midnight*" takes the former route, claiming for Millay the intention to destabilize male notions of femininity as represented in the dialogue of the various male characters

at this evening's homosocial entertainment.²⁹ Exemplifying the latter position, Susan Schweik's readings of Millay's World War II poetry, though they are often complimentary to the poet, are situated within a cultural context that emphasizes the connections between work dismissed as "propaganda" and notions of femininity. Thus they contribute to the view of Millay as an effect of modernism more than a creative force within it.

This brings us to the last of our three versions of the resurrected Edna St. Vincent Millay: Millay as postmodernist. At the Skidmore Conference of 1992, we heard a number of fascinating papers that employed postmodern perspectives in their treatment of this early twentieth-century poet. Among the papers delivered by panelists—many of them still at that time graduate students—I think particularly of Marilyn May Lombardi's "Vampirism and Translation: Millay, Baudelaire, and the Erotics of Poetic Transfusion," Camille Roman's "Millay's Dialogism: Negotiating Cultural and Assimilative Feminisms," Kerry Maguire's "Through the Looking Glass, or *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* and the Gaze of the Domestic Mirror," and Lisa Myers's "Her Mother's Voice: Feminism, Poetry, Psychoanalysis." (Myers also delivered this paper at the Modern Language Association Convention in December 1992 where it drew appreciative laughter for its creative reading of what has been, for me, one of the most difficult of Millay's poems to like, "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver.")

Another sign of the times at Skidmore in 1992 was that both Suzanne Clark and I, who were giving plenary speeches, had chosen (independently) to depart from what had been the thrust of our published work on Millay—seeing her as a kind of modernist—and to discuss her as a postmodern instance instead. These papers now appear in Diane P. Freedman's anthology *Edna St. Vincent Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal* so I will not dwell upon them in detail. However, it is worth noting here that Clark's paper—entitled "Uncanny Millay"—emphasizes the decentered subject forced upon the reader's awareness in Millay's poetry and argues: "We can see that the question of the imaginary identity is a matter for public and political struggle. The double sense of strangeness and familiarity which marks the uncanny should alert us to the struggle over the terrain of the subject taking place in Millay's poetry." No longer does Millay's interest (or her feminism) belong to a realm outside the poetry as it often did in *Sentimental Modernism*. Instead, Clark writes, "In her words, poetry speaks again, with an uncanny resonance precisely because it was a male tradition that would exclude it. Such speech is a kind of activism, a feminism on her part."³⁰

In this paper Suzanne Clark drew our attention to a wonderful Millay poem I had overlooked before called "The Pond." Its narrator seems to

be telling us about a farmer's daughter who long ago drowned herself after being jilted by her beau. But in her fantasy of this girl, the narrator changes the love plot into an uncanny performance where even at the moment of death the urge to "camp it up" overcomes what might be read as authenticity.

Can you not conceive the sly way, —
Hearing wheels or seeing men

Passing on the road above, —
With a gesture feigned and silly
Ere she drowned herself for love,
She would reach to pluck a lily?³¹

What interests Clark is the way this uncanny gesture dissimulates the girl's extremity, calling into question the whole romantic narrative of a jilted woman drowning herself for love; in its histrionics, Clark suggests, this fantasy plays havoc with notions of art as based upon a woman's dead body, the body of the sublime male text.

My own paper, "The Female Body as Icon: Edna Millay Wears a Plaid Dress," focused on two poems—"The Fitting" and "The Plaid Dress"—where I too found a decentered and antifoundational subjectivity, though it seemed to me in this paper (as in Susan Bordo's discussion of Madonna, which I quoted) a cause less for celebration than for lament.³² In one of the many startling moments of uncanniness at the conference, Sandra Gilbert had also chosen to discuss these same poems.

Clearly we are witnessing a rejuvenation of interest in Edna St. Vincent Millay, and that interest is beginning to crystallize around some previously underanalyzed texts. I'm not sure, however, that we can say that Millay has fully reentered the canon since it is hard to know to what extent her work is being taught in survey courses across the country. The new Films for the Humanities video suggests broader attention to her work but in itself does not provide the data we need. (I can say, however, that I was struck recently by the fact that Charles Altieri, whom I would classify as a philosophical critic interested in aesthetics, and who is certainly an advocate of canonical modernism, was rereading and enjoying Millay in preparation for teaching her.) One way of assessing how a poet's reputation is changing is by looking at teaching anthologies, and therefore I will conclude this assessment of Millay's current status by making a few brief comments about her presence (or lack of presence) there. To take an example at random from something I can quickly pull

off my shelf, in Lionel Trilling's 1967 anthology, *The Experience of Literature*,³³ dozens of male modern poets are represented but the only woman included is Marianne Moore, allowed two poems: "Poetry" and "Elephants."³³ The Prentice-Hall *American Literature* anthology, revised in 1991, is a much more contemporary work and shows some influence of feminism and multiculturalism on the literary establishment, but its choices among modern poets are, in fact, only marginally more thoughtful. Under "Early 20th-Century Poetry" one finds Robinson, Frost, Sandburg, Stevens, Williams, Pound, Eliot, Cummings, Crane, and then some less obvious choices: Ivor Winters, Allen Tate, Langston Hughes, and Stanley Kunitz. The women poets in this section are H. D. (who has definitely entered the canon now), Marianne Moore, and Louise Bogan. There is no mention of Edna St. Vincent Millay, even in the introductory essay providing cultural context for early twentieth-century poetry. In the introduction to Louise Bogan, who was deeply influenced by Millay as well as by other women poets such as Sara Teasdale, Bogan herself is linked only to male friends: Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and Rolfe Humphries. Léonie Adams is mentioned but merely as someone with whom Bogan shared the Bollingen Prize, not as the friend and influence she was.³⁴

The anthology that has done most to shake up previous orthodoxies about who deserves inclusion is *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, first published in 1990 and recently revised. The *Heath Anthology* does indeed include Millay (as well as Gertrude Stein, Lola Ridge, Gwendolyn Bennett, H. D., Marianne Moore, and Louise Bogan) among the moderns. The introductory essay is written by John J. Patton, long an admirer of Millay's work. He notes in his conclusion that the "last twenty years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Millay,"³⁵ yet his selections of her work—if indeed they are his—are curiously conservative. None of the poems that stimulated so much interest at the Skidmore Conference is included here.

What about other mass-market anthologies? Here is a quick survey. The Macmillan anthology (1989), edited by George McMichael, has no Millay. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*—volume 2—long a favorite of mine, has not only Millay but Bogan, Moore, Lowell, H. D., Rukeyser, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Genevieve Taggard. (Sadly, they have now removed Elinor Wylie.) The 1994 fourth edition has also changed the Millay offerings, reducing the love poems from the 1989 sample and expanding the political poems; it also now includes "I Will Put Chaos into Fourteen Lines."³⁶ One could, of course, suggest other poems. *The American Tradition in Literature* (published by McGraw-Hill and most recently updated in 1990) gives an unusually long three-page

introduction to the poet and includes several of the passionate sonnets as well as “Justice Denied in Massachusetts” (on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial) and “Passer Mortuus Est.”³⁷

However, among the anthologies I have mentioned, only the new revised *Heath Anthology* provides any recent bibliographical references. What this suggests to me is that the anthologies have not yet caught up with what has happened to Millay scholarship in the last five years and this is hardly surprising. I suspect that in the coming decade we will see a very different positioning of Millay’s work and probably different selections from the poetry. *The Heath Introduction to Poetry*—soon to appear in a new edition—will be a place to look for evidence of change in Millay’s reputation and critical construction.

In many ways the whole direction of literary studies has changed in recent years and what used to be a highly male-dominated and British-oriented discipline has become increasingly American and female. The *Heath Anthology* reflected these changes earlier than others with its far broader representation of women and minorities. Edna Millay is somehow peculiarly appropriate to this reconstructed discipline, not only because of her stress on issues of interest to young women, such as love, identity, and politics, but also because she interrogated the theme of nation, which is so prominent in literary studies today. (See, for example, her “Not for a Nation.”)

But what about the canon? Does the presence or absence of Edna St. Vincent Millay signal major differences in our understanding of who can be part of the canon? Some years ago, let us say in Lionel Trilling’s time, no modern women poets except for Marianne Moore were recognized as among the greats. Now a lot more women are taken seriously. Even more than Edna Millay, Gertrude Stein has come to seem an important literary (instead of simply cultural) figure. I would suggest, however, that Stein could not occupy this position were it not for critical and cultural postmodernism and the popularity of gay and lesbian studies. It is not that we have suddenly come to see what was always valuable about her work. It is rather that, given our present literary values, we can make Stein into a representative figure. She lends herself to it.

The same can be said for Edna St. Vincent Millay who, because she combines elements we now associate with past and future, seems again to have “the right stuff.” The canon, indeed the whole idea of canonicity, is founded upon a conception of change and continuity. No matter how strange a writer may at first appear, she must ultimately be seen as readdressing the past as well as forging ahead into the future. This principle has not changed and will not change with the introduction of a few women writers; they too must have friends in high places and some of these friends must belong to the old order.³⁸ That is, they must be men.

What *has* changed, perhaps, is the construction of the usable past. But this is always changing. We are always refocusing the lens and, as we do, it is only to be expected that some figures will lose definition while others, who once hovered in the background, will suddenly gain a clarity of image and an expansiveness of presence we fool ourselves into thinking was always there to be seen.

Notes

1. *The J. Peterman Company Owner's Manual No. 25b* (Fall 1993): 11.
2. Joseph DeRoche, ed. *The Heath Introduction to Poetry*, 4th ed. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1992), 442.
3. *Ibid.*, 442–43.
4. Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity, in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1987), 115.
5. *Ibid.*, 124.
6. Boris Ford, ed. *American Literature: The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 9, (London: Penguin Books, 1988).
7. Winfield Townley Scott, "Millay Collected," *Poetry* 63 (March 1944): 335.
8. Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, "Poet as Persona: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Problems of Representation" (unpublished manuscript), 1–28.
9. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).
10. John Crowe Ransom, "The Poet as Woman," *Southern Review*, 2 (Spring 1937): 783–806.
11. Kaiser, "Poet as Persona," 17.
12. Susan Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).
13. Kaiser, "Poet as Persona," 20–21.
14. Bette Richart, "Poet of Our Youth," *Commonweal*, 10 May 1957, 150–51.
15. Daniel Hoffman, ed. *Harvard Guide to Contemporary Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 456.
16. See Edmund Wilson, "Epilogue, 1952: Edna St. Vincent Millay," in *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1952), 787; and Joan Dash, *A Life of One's Own* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 215. For "The Poet and His Book," see Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Poems*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 87.
17. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), and *No Man's Land*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988, 1989, and 1994).
18. Sandra Gilbert, "Female Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality" in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. William B. Thesing (1985; New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), 293–312.
19. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1985), 1554.
20. Paul Engle, "Edna Millay: A Summing Up of Her Work" in Thesing, *Critical Essays*, 97.
21. Colin Falck, "Introduction: The Modern Lyricism of Edna Millay" in Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Selected Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), xxix. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *SP*.

22. Debra Fried, "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets" in Thesing, *Critical Essays*, 238. Subsequent references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

23. John Hyde Preston, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 3 (1927): 343.

24. Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 96. A version of that essay appears in this volume.

25. Clark, *Sentimental Modernism*, 78.

26. Cheryl Walker, *Masks Outrageous and Austere: Culture, Psyche, and Persona in Modern Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 148.

27. Gilbert, "Female Female Impersonator," 300.

28. *Ibid.*, 302.

29. Susan Gilmore, "'Poesies of Sophistry': Impersonation and Authority in Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Conversation at Midnight*" in *Edna St. Vincent Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, ed. Diane P. Freedman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995).

30. Suzanne Clark, "Uncanny Millay," in Freedman, *Millay at 100*, 24–25.

31. Millay, *Collected Poems*, 176. This poem does not appear in Falck.

32. Cheryl Walker, "The Female Body as Icon: Edna Millay Wears a Plaid Dress," in Freedman, *Millay at 100*, 85–99.

33. Lionel Trilling, *The Experience of Literature* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1967).

34. *American Literature: A Prentice-Hall Anthology*, vol. 2, ed. Emory Elliott et al. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991).

35. John J. Patton, "Edna St. Vincent Millay 1892–1950," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter et al. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1990, 1994), 1247.

36. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Nina Baym et al. (4th ed.; New York: Norton, 1994).

37. *The American Tradition in Literature*, vol. 2, ed. George Perkins et al. (7th ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

38. For an interesting argument in favor of attempting to understand the canon as a counterpoise to contemporary fads and pressures, see Charles Altieri's *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990).