

Broadcasting the Sentimental:  
Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Celebrity of Early Radio

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2015

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To mom and dad.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper treats Edna St. Vincent Millay's relationship with early radio, particularly the eight week segment she did for NBC in the winter of 1932-33. One of the most culturally ubiquitous and celebrated literary figures of the interwar period, Millay has, since about 1950, been largely dismissed from serious literary discussion for being a too-accessible and "sentimental" poet. She was not a High Modernist. She did, however, appropriate the authority of the new broadcast medium for her own ends and needs to be studied for her cultural impact as well as for her canonical (or anti-canonical) reputation. Millay's broadcasts represent one of the clearest and most successful examples of literary self-promotion in a career which influenced a next generation of female poets and which may have contributed to a shifting understanding of poetic "voice" in the twentieth century.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank you to my supervisor, Professor Leonard Diepeveen, for his continued guidance and support—his patience with those messy early drafts and muddled half-questions is deeply appreciated. Thank you also to my second reader, Professor Anthony Enns, for his insightful and challenging (in the best way) questions, and to my third reader, Professor David Evans, for his honest and thoughtful comments.

To Adria and Mary Beth, for always having an answer to panicky last minute emails and for their continued kindness, I will be eternally grateful. You got us all through it.

Thank you to Liam, Brittany, and Jane for listening, to the whole of the graduate cohort in the English department for creating great work that inspired and excited me, and to my family, as always, for being there.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Treating radio programs as literature...misses the point of broadcasting; the material sent over the airwaves exists primarily to gather and retain an audience for advertising.  
-- Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*<sup>1</sup>

Radio provides an effective means of popular instruction... Documentary programs and drama, designed to convince, inspire, and move, have taken an important place in radio, not alone for their educational and historical value but for their contribution to the thought and feeling of our time.  
-- Margaret Cuthbert, *Adventure in Radio*

In the winter of 1932-33, Edna St. Vincent Millay read her poetry aloud to thousands of audience members across the United States as part of an eight-week segment for the WJZ Blue Network (Milford 367), a network run by NBC. This, and other such programs featuring orchestral compositions and radio dramas, were part of a broader endeavour on the part of recently established broadcast companies to legitimate themselves and their media through the circulation of intellectual content (Wheeler “Materializing” 240). Millay’s segment aired every Sunday and was wildly successful: she received “nearly fifteen hundred” fan letters as a result (Furr *Recorded* 2) and men and women who had not previously owned personal radios are said to have gone out by the dozen to buy them in order to tune in each week (Milford 91). That Millay’s broadcasts were so well received is not itself surprising. Already “regarded as ‘the Miss America of 1920’” (Showalter 303), Millay was the object of both popular and critical celebration at the time her broadcasts began: she had been selling out reading tours for nearly a decade (Milford xiv), had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923, and was, along with new American skyscrapers, the only worthwhile export to have come out of the United States in the post-war period according to Thomas Hardy (Milford xiii). But

Millay was also the first poet to read her work on air in such a regular and sustained way (Wheeler “Materializing” 238). Speaking passionately in the lyric “I,” and using the “strong and simple” language (Kaplan 272) one early critic identified as an ideal style for broadcasting, Millay endeared herself to contemporary audiences and exceeded even the broadcast company’s expectations of her popularity. She was, as Lesley Wheeler asserts, “a broadcast pioneer” (“Materializing” 238) as well as a literary celebrity.

That Millay has, since about 1950, been largely dismissed from serious literary discussion for being, as Wheeler concedes, “a conventional figure” (“Materializing” 238), a “sentimental (m)Other” (*Sentimental* 8) in Suzanne Clark’s Freudian understanding of the era, might therefore present a more interesting conundrum even than did her spectacular on-air popularity in the winter of 1932-33. Writing poems which adhered to inherited understandings of rhyme, meter, rhythm, lineation, punctuation, capitalization, and which treated well-trodden subjects like death, love, and childhood innocence, Millay became known, over the course of her career, as a sentimental poet. Broadcasting that “sentimental poetry” to thousands of non-specialist listeners every week in an era which was coming to revere High Modernist difficulty and exclusivity above all else (Diepeveen xi),<sup>2</sup> Millay’s posthumous literary reputation fell subject to what a number of critics have identified as the “gendering” of “mass culture” by modernism, “identifying woman with the mass and regarding its productions as ‘kitsch,’ as ‘camp’ and, like advertising, as objects of critical disdain” (Clark *Sentimental* 4, see

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<sup>1</sup> qtd. in Wheeler “Materializing” 239-240.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my paper I will use “High Modernism” and “Modernism,” with a capital “M,” in reference to the canonical writers of the avant-garde tradition and to the canonical period as the New Critics of the 1950s and 60s especially came to frame its study around them—writers like Eliot, Pound, Stein, Woolf, etc. In reference to the historical period stretching from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the Second World War, at its extreme end,—the period in which Millay was living and writing—I will use “modernism” with a small “m.”

also Huysen 47, 53). She may have been one of the most famous poets of the interwar years but she is not canonical and even the most admiring critics of Millay's work have yet to reach a consensus about how to discuss this "girl poet" (Showalter 304) within a field of study which has so thoroughly adopted the High Modernist aesthetic as its twentieth-century ideal.

Influential critics like Lawrence Rainey, Aaron Jaffe, and others have, in the last several decades, made great strides in deconstructing and decoding the ways in which "prominent modernists" like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were "more canny about fashioning their careers...than is often appreciated" (Jaffe 3) and in demystifying what Jaffe calls "the academic invention of modernism" (88), explaining why some names disappear while others become immortalized in the abstract directories of the "canon." Critics studying the impacts of radio broadcasting on literary modernism have, likewise, begun to unpack the ways in which this new medium may have affected, contributed to, and perhaps even become a negative impression of, a literary canon most often understood to be a print-based tradition. But there remains much work to be done, both regarding the discourses of power underlying the Modernist literary canon and concerning the ways in which this canon was affected or shaped by new broadcast technologies. As Jaffe remarks at the beginning of *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, "only a dozen or so names and texts remain in heavy rotation when modernism is discussed" despite "all the revisionist work about the canon [which has been done] during the last decades" (1). The majority of the theoretical work which has been done on radio broadcasting, has moreover, until very recently, treated primarily that new medium's impact on the way orchestral music came to circulate in the twentieth century



culture—leaving talk radio and radio dramas or poetry readings largely unexplored. Our perspective on the modern literary canon is still quite narrow. Our understanding of the ways in which radio broadcasting may have impacted that literary landscape is still in its infancy.

In the examination of twentieth-century hierarchies of difficulty and sentimentality, Millay's relationship with early radio is therefore an interesting and, I would like to propose, important example because of the way she used her literary celebrity while she was alive and because she has been critically marginalized by the very qualities which made her broadcasts so successful when they first aired in the 1930s. Writing to Eliot's father, in 1915, about the various ways to succeed as a poet, Pound articulates one of the tenets of the high modernist reputation, explaining that "man succeeds either by the scarceness or the abundance of copy" (qtd. in Jaffe 7). Pound and Eliot favoured the former strategy, Millay the latter. She was more culturally ubiquitous than almost any other poet of the interwar years and took advantage of a number of different platforms to advertise both her poetry and herself as poet-personality. But her relationship with her audience and with literary scholars was, at the height of her celebrity as after her death, complex and relatively problematic. A female celebrity in an era subject to a number of "implicitly and explicitly" (Rainey 137) gendered literary institutions, Millay was in many ways a dutiful literary figure. She did not defy any of the formal conventions vehemently rejected by her Modernist peers and delighted in being called the "poetess" or "girl poet" (Showalter 304) of her era. But she was also a self-professed feminist and did defy conventions of gender, challenging, if not the poetic forms of the previous century or its codes of public behaviour, then the gendered

ideological suppositions of the Western canon. She was not a High Modernist writer but she was an avant-garde figure in the way that she conceived of gender in her poetry and her impact on twentieth-century understandings of gender and poetry may have been, as Suzanne Clark argues, largely unconscious (“Uncanny Millay” 25). Her radio broadcasts, because they reached such a large audience and because they were so tied to the moment in which they aired, may, in turn, have been an important factor in propagating this unconscious social impact.

To study the impacts of radio broadcasting on literary modernism or on a given poet’s cultural celebrity presents a number of challenges. As Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty detail in the introduction to *Broadcasting Modernism*, the study of specific authors’ relationships with the medium can be tricky because radio broadcasts have always been, by and large, “ephemeral” (2). Few recordings from the days of early radio exist today and even the transcripts of most programs, if they ever did exist, have since been lost. Studying Millay’s relationship with poetry recordings is slightly easier than in other cases because her audience was so vocal, giving us some sense of how many listeners she garnered, and because these listeners articulated in their letters to her exactly why they found her so enchanting. Even Millay’s broadcasts however, popular though they were, went largely unrecorded and unpreserved. Only one full broadcast, to which I have not had access, and a few scattered recordings of individual poems, to which I have, remain from her eight week engagement:<sup>3</sup> everything else from that winter session has been lost, leaving interested parties to find ways to study her broadcasts

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<sup>3</sup> The one surviving broadcast was recorded on two discs and can be found in both the Brander Matthews Collection at Columbia University and at the Library of Congress (Wheeler “Materializing” 242). Her Christmas day 1932 broadcast of “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” exists on YouTube and includes both the accompanying musical interlude and the host’s introduction of the piece; original 1933 recordings of

without full access to either her set lists or actual performances. Derek Furr and Lesley Wheeler have each written excellent analyses of Millay's relationship with early broadcasting. In "Listening to Millay" and *Recorded Poetry and Poetic Reception from Edna Millay to the Circle of Robert Lowell*, Furr investigates how public perceptions of Millay's sincerity have shifted since the mid 1930s; addressing Millay's attitudes towards radio, among other things, in "Materializing Millay" and *Voicing American Poetry*, Wheeler illustrates how Millay and other modern poets "used, and were used by, a developing medium" ("Materializing" 238). Because I have not had access to the full surviving broadcast from the 1932-33 season, I have depended on Wheeler's *Voicing American Poetry*, in particular, for details regarding the contents and qualities of that Sunday night recording. But the way Millay's enthusiastic participation in early broadcasting may have affected her career or popular reputation and the kind of social legacy her broadcasts, uttered in her own female voice, may have bequeathed to contemporary listeners has yet to have been adequately considered: already one of the most famous poets in America at the time her broadcasts aired, Millay became even more famous as a result of her relationship with the new medium; her broadcasts both secured her position as a female literary celebrity of unprecedented popularity and influence and contributed to the "feminization" (here I use the term as Clark does, to indicate the way various female poets, especially, were "gendered female" by their participation in the mass culture) of that reputation following her death.

It is therefore to the problem of understanding how Millay fits into the complex discourses of Modernism as a popular poet and on-air personality and to the legacy of

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Millay reading "This Beast that Rends Me" and "Not in a Silver Casket," both from *Fatal Interview*, can be found online at *SoundBeat*, run by the Syracuse University Libraries.

that on-air popularity that I have turned my attention. The specific nature of Millay's radio-celebrity, dependent on the "illusion of intimacy" (Wheeler "Materializing" 238) and sense of familiarity encouraged by both her expressive first person poetry and by the way she read that poetry on air, creating in Millay's reputation the counterpoint to New Critical rejections of the author figure, turned her into one of the twentieth century's most valuable literary commodities. Her broadcasts functioned, as Susan Smulyan has argued of the medium more generally (Wheeler "Materializing 239-240), as advertisements—in Millay's case, of her literary-personality. But radio also became, as Millay's producer Margaret Cuthbert argued of the medium in 1945, "an effective means of popular instruction" in the twentieth century (153), whether it was intended as such or not. Advertising herself in the mass culture of the 1920s and 1930s, Millay became an important figure in what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as not an "anxiety of influence" but an "anxiety of authorship" (*Madwoman* 51) for twentieth century female writers. Indeed, even as Millay's printed poetry was symbolically elided from the twentieth century hierarchy of the literary canon by critics like John Crowe Ransom, who dubbed her "barely very intellectual" (qtd. in Clark *Sentimental* 9) as early as 1936, Millay was revered and rebelled against in equal measure by female poets of the next generation like Genevieve Taggard, Dorothy Parker, Tillie Olsen, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath (Showalter, Furr *Recorded*). Because Millay used radio broadcasting so successfully to circulate her poetry on a scale impossible before the birth of that new medium, because she read poems which engaged issues of gender and sexuality, and because her broadcasts were so well received by audiences, her broadcasts must be considered as both aural texts—new medium advertisements for the poet herself—and as

pieces of literature unto themselves, ideologically charged and culturally influential beyond the initial “event” of their being broadcast. Millay’s public treatment of gender and the sounding of her literal female voice reading woman-centered poetry on air may have had a bigger impact on twentieth-century audiences even than did her individual poems, or broadcasts, themselves.

## CHAPTER 2: A “Girl Poet” on the Radio

When we listen to recordings of Millay reading her poetry now, it is easy to understand both why contemporary audiences loved to listen to her and why post Second World War audiences were more sceptical. Her readings are, as Furr argues, rooted in the time in which they were first released. Raised in fairly modest conditions and coming to support her mother and sisters from her earnings throughout much of her career, Millay’s early life is often framed as a kind of fairy tale by admiring readers and critics. She began writing and publishing poetry at a very young age, received a scholarship to attend Vassar after a woman named Caroline B. Dow saw her read “Renascence” aloud at a party and decided to fund her education (Milford 69), and was, by the mid 1920s, one of the most popular and successful poets of post-war era. That her early career began with a poetic performance of “Renascence” now seems fitting because public readings and broadcast performances became such a large part of her life in the years to follow, but this first important reading also speaks to the kind of literary figure Millay was throughout her career. Writing of Millay’s celebrity in her acclaimed 2001 biography, *Savage Beauty*, Nancy Milford notes that the poet’s work was “assumed to be daringly autobiographical” (182). Readers conflated Millay with her first person speakers especially, and seem to have enjoyed her poetry all the more for that conflation. As Milford recounts, Dow “was stunned by Millay’s poem, but even more by the provincial girl’s assured performance” (69). The young poet’s success was, from the very beginning, tied to public perceptions of who she was as a literary personality.

To today’s listener, Millay’s broadcasts can therefore sound dated and overly sincere. For one thing, the poetry she was writing and reading aloud, throughout the first

two decades of her career in particular, was quite traditional. Sidestepping the anxieties and possibilities for experimentation brought on by advancements in printing technologies and by the beginnings of a mass media market since the mid-nineteenth century (Bold 1-4), Millay was meticulous in her adherence to traditional forms of poetry. Her poems seem to emerge from an earlier century than the one in which she was writing: she wrote mainly sonnets—“everything poetry wasn’t” (Howarth 225) according to modernists like Pound and Eliot—and lyric poems which are, as Adorno argues in “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” fundamentally democratic in their characteristic emotional accessibility. Going so far as to pre-emptively defend an alexandrine substitution in a 1920 letter to a friend with a particularly fastidious husband, Millay writes: “Tell Mr. Kennedy, before he has time to remark the fact himself, that I know very well the sonnets of the incomplete sequence are not perfect sonnets,—I made the fourteenth line an alexandrine purposefully,” she writes. “Remind him also... that Meredith made some rather nice poems of sixteen lines each which we permit to be called sonnets” (*Letters* 72). Fascinated by classical Greek forms of verse and drawing inspiration from the sonnet sequences of great English poets, Millay is unperturbed and even seemingly unaware in this letter (she uses Meredith as a precedent for formal flexibility) of the experimental sonnets being written by her more avant-garde contemporaries (Howarth 226). She would certainly become aware of High Modernism and of its tenets of difficulty later in her career, even casting what her friend Cass Canfield called “a deadly spotlight on the false attitudes and pretentiousness of Eliot and a whole group of writers that imitate him” (qtd. in Milford 494), in a late 1930s satire of

Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Milford 493).<sup>4</sup> But her own poems are traditional, meant as Clark argues, to "invite" the reader in and to "heal alienation" (Clark *Sentimental* 69).

And Millay read those poems on air in a stylized elocutionary voice intended to amplify those qualities of accessibility and familiarity and to encourage the kind of glowing approval she had first received from Dow. Having studied theatre at Vassar, once harbouring aspirations of becoming an actress, Millay was a theatrical reader. Throughout existing recordings of Millay reading her own poetry, she inflects her voice and pauses to guide her listeners through the formal structures of her poems and to emphasize emotional signposts. They are passionate and performative. This "theatricality" is readily apparent in her 1941 Caedmon recordings of poems like "Portrait by a Neighbour" or "Childhood is a Kingdom where Nobody Dies." In the former, Millay affects a witchy voice to speak of herself in the third person as a woman who "weeds her lazy lettuce / By the light of the moon" (11-12) or who "forgets she borrowed butter / And pays you back cream!" (15-16). In the latter, she puts on the nagging voice of a parent to chastise "I do wish to gracious you'd stop tapping on the window with your thimble!" (20). But even in reference to the eight poems of the surviving 1933 broadcast episode, Wheeler writes that "she creates different voices for various poems by varying her pitch and timing significantly" (*Voicing* 51).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in her first-ever recorded poem, a Christmas day 1932 broadcast of "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," this attention to pitch and timing evidences itself as Millay reads the full piece in a single emphatic voice-character. The poem recounts the story of a poor family

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<sup>4</sup> The satirical piece was called *The Cult of the Occult* and can be found alongside Millay's existing broadcast recording at the Library of Congress archives.

<sup>5</sup> Wheeler lists the eight recorded poems as sounding in the following order: 1. "God's World," 2. "Not in a silver casket cool with pearls," 3. "Moon, that against the lintel of the west," 4. "You say, 'Since life is



who experience a miracle, and Millay's reading emphasizes that textual sentimentality, seeming overly sincere and sentimental, almost bombastic, now. As Furr observes, there is an exaggerated sincerity in Millay's aural interpretations, a lack of irony, which it can be difficult, as a twenty-first century listener to see beyond, and is even "embarrassing" to listen to (*Recorded* 99).

Furr nuances the seeming "inauthenticity" of these recordings in his analysis of Millay's broadcast career, drawing our attention to the "differences between listening to Millay 'then' versus 'now'" and argues "that the reception of Millay's readings provides an essential context for close listening" to other twentieth-century broadcasts (*Recorded* 93). The distinction between listening "then" and "now" is an important one: listeners who wrote in to NBC regarding Millay's original broadcasts evidence none of the disillusioned cynicism with which contemporary critics must grapple. They read her dramatically earnest deliveries as an extension of her "poetess" identity and seem to have used Millay's readings to sustain a romanticized image of the "girl poet." A friend of Millay's broadcast producer once articulated that Millay "was a person who made one believe, in her presence, that there is a muse. And Edna was visited by her" (qtd. in Milford 368). Indeed, though audiences of Millay's reading tours in the mid 1920s often spoke of how "enchanting" she was, of her "charms" (Furr *Recorded* 90), these responses were frequently clouded by references to Millay's wardrobe and physical appearance (Wheeler "Materializing" 244). In her broadcast readings, when she spoke through an expressive first person persona without the distraction of physicality, the impact on her audience seems to have been purer. Listeners were able to experience what Wheeler calls

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cruel enough at best," 5. Oh, sleep forever in a Latman cave," 6. "City Trees," 7. "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare," 8. "Elaine" (*Voicing* 52).

Millay's "powerful voice issuing from a small slim figure in a long formal gown" ("Materializing" 244) without the distraction of the gown. They grew, as Milford notes, to "love" her (Milford 367): "The very sound of your voice transforms our country living room into a place of magic" (qtd. in Milford 367) wrote one family from Missouri, citing the kind of muse-driven enchantment of her presence noted above. "Don't, don't ever change, and become stiff or formal or eloquent," wrote another listener, "You sound so real, so natural, so—so very much alive. Even with the frightful cold you had... Miss Millay—please do not stop your Sunday nights, go on and on and on" (qtd. in Milford 368). Millay's listeners, far from being put off by what twenty-first century critics often read as Millay's too-earnest approach, which sounds to us like a deliberate (and therefore unsuccessful) performance, read the primary persona she created in her readings as effecting its own kind of "naturalness." They focus on her voice, as Furr, Wheeler, and Milford have all noted, but it is, importantly, an embodied voice. They liked her voice because they felt it embodied *her*.

Owing to its ability to reach listeners in their homes and because of the particular serendipity of "channel flipping," radio, more than any other medium at the beginning of the twentieth century, facilitated this newly familiar relationship between poet and audience. Listeners did not necessarily have to identify as poetry-readers to be affected by her poetry, they simply had to tune in to the right channel at the right time. "That radio should offer this hope," this opportunity for the reintegration of poetry into the mainstream consciousness, was, Flora Rheta Schreiber wrote in 1952, "paradoxical, for radio was itself the offspring of the very technology that had been a contributing factor to the estrangement" (399). But poetry, like everything else in the twentieth century, had to

get with the times to stay relevant and radio did offer that paradoxical hope. Millay was not the only poet to take advantage of the new opportunity for publicity provided by radio broadcasting. Nor was she the only poet to inflect her voice or to make considerations for rendering her readings accessible. Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas each read their poetry on air and made distinct and conscious decisions regarding the voices they affected during their broadcasts. Stein and Eliot were moderately successful on air. Thomas, broadcasting his poetry several years after Millay's first broadcasts, enjoyed success similar to hers. One early listener even described the experience of listening to Thomas' broadcast voice in very similar terms to the ones used by Millay's audience:

Suddenly Dylan's glorious voice boomed out of the loudspeaker. It was an unforgettable experience—hearing him on the radio for the first time. The living room was filled with the presence of Dylan. (A. E. Trick qtd. in Maud vi)

But Millay's broadcasts are the most tied to the era in which they sounded. They are the most “embarrassingly” dated. As ephemeral, literary events, it is important that Millay's broadcasts be considered in light of their original context, our disbelief tempered with her original audience's adoring enthusiasm. The fact that the shift away from Millay's sincere reading style in the popular consciousness paralleled the more general shift away from the sentimental tradition in which she was writing towards the high modernist aesthetic of which Stein and Eliot were both important and visible figures, however, bears untangling. The shift away from Millay's particular verse aesthetic is indicative of a larger shift in public taste and various media forms necessarily factored into this equation in different but significant ways.

The modern literary canon, as it exists now (without Millay), has often been framed in opposition to the mass market culture of the early twentieth century. As Rainey remarks, “for some scholars, that contempt [for mass culture] is modernism’s salient characteristic” (2). This formulation “may be,” as Rainey argues, “inadequate to account for the growing complexity of cultural exchange and circulation in modern society” (2). The very fact that many of modernism’s most “elite” personalities broadcast their poetry on air, participating directly in that mass culture, acts as evidence of the slippery boundary between avant-garde and more mainstream modes of distribution. But radio is an excellent example of this kind of mass medium because radio was gendered, not just by its mass market value or “abundance of copy,” but also by its audience. Since early radios were a central focus of the private home, enjoying particular success in the evenings when families could listen together and during the day when homemakers and their children could listen while the man of the house was at work, especially in the “golden decade” of radio broadcasting in the 1930s, manufacturers often directed their early advertising towards women and their families specifically. One half-page advertisement published in the April 1932 edition of *Modern Mechanix*—the same year Millay was to begin her broadcasts on NBC—illustrates this kind of targeted marketing beautifully. Titled, “Latest for Housewives,” the ad positions a large photograph of a smiling woman seated on her kitchen counter with her newly installed appliance beside a text which says the following:

Concealed neatly just behind the table, and finished in harmony with the rest of the cabinet, the set is easily accessible, always ready to tell the

housewife the latest cooking recipes and the latest song hits to keep her cheerful.<sup>6</sup>

Early broadcasting was gendered, not just by the elite artistic communities which sought to distance themselves from its mass market appeal by identifying the whole medium as a vehicle for less-rigorous artistic output, but also by its target audience—the housewife who used it to keep herself cheerful.

And Millay's relationship with this audience was different from that of either Stein, Eliot, or Thomas. In *The Difficulties of Modernism*, Leonard Diepeveen argues that the characteristic "difficulty" of High Modernist experimentation, that to which Eliot and Stein in particular subscribed, is an expression of the "*relationship* that came into being between modernist works and their audiences" (xi), that relationship being one of awe and incomprehension as much as of rigorous intellectual rapport. Identifying the broadcast audience as one they wanted to reach but not necessarily be understood by, Stein and Eliot therefore faced a problem: as Wheeler asserts, to read one's own work aloud on air "is to hawk not only the words but one's very body in public marketplaces" (*Voicing* 12); to engage too personally with a mass audience raises a possible threat to what Jaffe calls the "elite literary reputation" (4) of the avant-garde writer. It was a potential danger of which Stein and Eliot, in particular, were aware. Indeed, where Millay seems to have read primarily shorter poems on air to facilitate her listener's ability to follow her meaning (Wheeler "Materializing" 242), emphasizing and enunciating to guide them through each piece, Stein and Eliot each employed various strategies to hold their audience at bay. Stein, coming to radio rather late in her career in the mid 1930s (Wilson 107) read, like Millay, in an emphatic tone, casting her voice along the trilling

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for the full advertisement.

repetitions of poems like “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso,” with obvious delight:<sup>7</sup> “Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon” (*PennSound*). She preserved her reputation as a “difficult” modernist, however, because the poems she read on air were so famously labyrinthine and incomprehensible. Her reading of “If I Told Him” is engaging. It is exciting. But it is also disorienting. It does not allow for the listener to become emotionally involved with its poet because the performance is, at least in a superficial way, meaningless—it defies conventional understandings of poetic meaning. Eliot, for his part, emphasized and increased the difficulty of understanding *The Waste Land* in 1946 by refusing listeners any of the emotive signposts foregrounded in Millay’s readings. In this most readily available version of the recorded poem, Eliot recites in a droning monotone. He excises what seems to be as much of his own personality as possible. In this way he, like Stein, found a way to take advantage of radio as a new medium for advertising his literary celebrity without making himself, or his work, approachable. Certainly, neither poet’s performance could be said to have curbed the listener’s sense of modern “alienation,” as Millay’s were said to have done.

In the comparison of these poetry-broadcast-styles, allowances must be made for inherent aesthetic differences: a recording by Stein was never going to sound like a recording by Eliot, was never going to sound like a recording by Millay. They were distinct artists with distinct aesthetic identities. Further evidence suggests, however, that the strategies Stein and Eliot employed in these two examples were conscious, even calculated. The differences in their approaches to radio were also intentional as well as organic. Indeed though Eliot’s 1946 reading is readily available and authoritative—

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<sup>7</sup> written 1923, recorded as part of The Speech Lab Recordings, recorded by George W. Hibbitt at Columbia University on January 30, 1935 (*PennSound*).

authoritative in that it is the last existing recording of the poem and reflects his final intentions of how it should be read—there exists a 1933 recording of the same poem which is significantly more difficult to access today but which Furr describes in *Recorded Poetry* as evidencing an Eliot who is charming and charismatic (*Recorded* 38). In this earlier recording, Eliot is purported to have put on voices (like Millay) and to have committed himself to bringing out the nuances of his text through delivery. Virginia Woolf, delighted with the reading, wrote at the time that “he sang and chanted it. It has a great beauty and force of phrase: symmetry & tensivity” (qtd. in Furr *Recorded* 38). Contrasting the two recordings, Furr argues that Eliot’s later reading, “famously dolorous and intentionally monotonous,” prioritizes form over delivery: “the language is, as it were, left to stand on its own” (Furr *Recorded* 39). This may have been part of the motivation behind what has to have been a conscious decision to read the poem differently in 1946—by this time, Eliot had had more time to develop an individually preferred style of reading. But this change also represents a conscious decision to make his persona, his commodified personality, less accessible to his listener: if the goal had been simply to resist obscuring the authority of the poem through aural interpretation, he could have simply let the printed copy stand. The 1933 recording is about the man as much as it is about the words. Stein, likewise, seems to have been aware of the auditory “difficulty” of her on-air readings and defended her right to that difficulty: insisting in a broadcast interview from 1937 that “understanding,” by which she takes her interviewer to mean “being able to turn it [a poem] into other words... is not necessary,” Stein articulates that “If you enjoy you understand if you understand you enjoy” (qtd. in Wilson 109). Here she confronts the issue of understanding directly. She acknowledges,

implicitly, that her radio performances are somewhat absurd, resistant to understanding. But why, she asks, should that stop you from listening? Obstinate in their commitments to nonsensical linguistic play and to the monotony of “difficult” aural interpretation, respectively, Stein and Eliot each risked turning themselves into objects of curious literary fascination—the woman who spouts nonsense, the boring man. But they managed to evade the still worse fate of engaging their listeners on a personal, emotive level.

Somewhere between Millay and the two writers I’ve discussed above, in terms of both canonical reputation and public reception, Dylan Thomas presents an interesting foil to Millay’s broadcast personality exactly because the two have so much in common: like Millay, Thomas used fairly traditional forms of poetry throughout his career; like Millay, he acted on the stage in his youth and intoned emphatically in his broadcasts and Caedmon recordings (Maud vi) —indeed his readings have often been compared to Millay’s for that reason (Furr *Recorded* 89); like Millay too, he occupies a far less secure position in the twentieth-century canon of “difficult” poetry than do either Stein or Eliot. Perhaps most importantly for our concerns, however, Thomas, like Millay, employed a variety of tones and voices in his readings and endeavoured to engage his listeners. As one BBC employee who worked with Thomas recalls, “Dylan...would try out different ways of ‘putting over’ a poem, and undergo criticism from the ‘listeners’” (qtd. in Maud vi). He had, as one of the BBC’s producers observed, incredible “range” as a radio performer (xiii). But where Thomas and Millay both suffered from alcoholism throughout much of their adult lives, only Thomas’ relationship with the substance became public knowledge and a facet of his public personality early in his career. Indeed, Thomas appeared on air, a number of BBC contemporaries observe, “in a somewhat



distraught state” (vi) and the very producer who admired Thomas for his “range” also learned to “keep him on beer all day till he had done his night’s work” (qtd. in Maud vi), at which point both men would go to the local pub for whiskies. Thomas’ on-air persona, though as engaging and beloved as Millay’s, was decidedly more unpredictable and dangerous. His deep resonant voice and drinking quickly became part of his literary mythology (Tobin 44) and he was saved from being gendered female or accused of writing “sentimental” poetry—itself a gendered categorization—because of this overt masculinity. He was a kind of bad boy of twentieth century poetry and people still listen to his recordings with admiration today.

It follows that neither Millay’s gender nor her traditional poetry alone were enough to have gendered her reputation as came to happen in the decades following the height of her popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. Millay was gendered by her sex and by her accessible poetry but, perhaps more than either of these things, by the fact that she did nothing to curb either of these factors in her readings. Thomas wrote formally traditional verse but was saved by his masculine persona and Stein was a woman poet who managed to resist being “gendered” female by her on-air readings because they were so formally “difficult.” Millay, by contrast, both read formally traditional poetry on air and embraced her role as “girl poet.” It would be a mistake to assume, however, that, because Millay’s readings don’t fit with the trajectory we have come to expect from canonical poets like Stein, Eliot, or Thomas, she was any less deliberate in her approach to those readings or that she was any less conscious of the kind of personality she was staging in those readings. Indeed, to make this assumption would be to measure Millay’s success (or failure) against goals and motivations not her own. For Millay had, as was mentioned

briefly above, financial reasons for wanting her broadcasts to succeed with a large popular audience (Wheeler “Materializing” 240, Bradshaw 157). She also does not seem to have had any of the High Modernist aversion to popular approval. In fact, she delighted in feeling herself the subject of public admiration. Addressing what seems today to be the alienating sincerity of Millay’s reading style, Furr asks if it is not possible that “in its overt artifice, Millay’s reading serves to distance her from the lyric’s speaker.” Locating the irony he admits to craving as a twenty-first century listener of her broadcasts, not in her readings themselves, but in her acting out of those readings, Furr writes that, “listening now, when an ironic performance of such a lyric would carry greater appeal than a sincere delivery, I am inclined to hear irony in Millay’s reading[s]” (*Recorded* 94). It is the difference, he articulates elsewhere, “between reading in one’s voice and reading in character” (21). The particular ironic insincerity Furr confesses to have sought out in his close-listening of a sonnet like “Not in a silver casket cool with pearls,” may be a retrospective imposition of irony. Millay’s broadcasts were, however, inarguably self-conscious and thus manifest a kind of incontestable irony which might help us to better understand her not adversarial, but certainly measured and deliberate, relationship with the medium.

### CHAPTER 3: Between Poetry and Self-Promotion

We have already established that Millay's oral interpretation of specific poems was performative. Exploiting public perceptions of her poetry as being largely autobiographical, and playing a public version of herself, of that autobiographical lyric "I," before and after each of these readings, however, Millay turned each broadcast appearance into a personal performance as well as a poetic one. She knew that her audiences engaged with her on a personal level and encouraged that kind of engagement in her broadcasts: in addition to putting on voices, she spoke to her audience between poems. She chatted and reassured them when she could not find the right page in her notes: "don't be nervous" (Milford 367), she'd say. Accepting requests from her listeners about what poems to read on air, she even managed to turn what is a fundamentally unidirectional form of communication into a dialogue between herself and her listeners, and took advantage of their initial enthusiasm—communicated to her through their letters—to facilitate further emotional involvement. She begins the existing recording, according to Wheeler's description of the tape, by apologizing that she is not going to read "Renaissance" despite popular request, promising to hold that poem over to the next week ("Materializing" 424). Millay endeavoured to give the impression that she was in the room with each member of her audience, able to take requests and accommodate his or her expectations for how the evening would go. She spoke to each individually, in his or her home, in each listener's private sphere. But she gave an impression of immediacy, through her casual interludes as through her conversational rapport with the audience which presented itself to her in its fan mail. And she did so on a weekly basis, allowing

admirers the opportunity to feel they'd developed a relationship with her, to worry about her when she caught sick!

Much of the apparent spontaneity of Millay's broadcasts was calculated. As Michailidou observes, Millay's program "would always follow a strict schedule" despite her extemporaneous interludes. Evidence of a kind of controlled improvisation, this adherence to a predetermined schedule "skilfully create[d] the impression of spontaneity and improvisation" (Michailidou 125), approximating the "liveness," which John Durham Peters argues "many of the most successful performers exploited... in the sense of either simultaneity or nondeath, to cut through public anxieties about fakery and duplication in the radio world" (Peters 215). Millay's broadcasts were performances, but they were performances of her persona as well as of her poetry. And they were, as Milford remarks, "exhausting hard work" (368). Writing to a friend about a missed visit in April of 1933, Millay explains:

You see, we couldn't go to Africa after all. I got a job reading my poems over the radio—eight Sunday evenings which kept me so late into the winter & made me so tired that when it was over we just rushed to Florida to get out of the cold & into the sunshine—I needed it badly. (*Letters* 248-49)

The broadcasts exacted a physical and emotional toll on Millay. But she was also very good at this kind of public performance of herself. Peters cites President Franklin Delano Roosevelt "suddenly" asking for a glass of water in the middle of one of his presidential addresses as a prime example of this kind of strategic realness, which Millay used when she could not find a poem, drawing attention to the issue instead of attempting to gloss

over the moment of human error: “My friends, it’s very hot here in Washington tonight” (qtd. in Peters 220), the president explains mid-speech, revealing himself to be at once down to earth and subject to the same physical needs as any of his listeners. The content and context of Millay’s addresses were quite different from those of the American president and required an altogether different (and lesser) sense of transparency; her listeners trusted her with their imaginations not with their politics or money. Nonetheless, Millay grew to be an expert in deliberate spontaneity over the course of her eight-week program. “Imperfection,” Peters reminds us, “was the guarantee of truth” (220).

It follows that, according to her own criteria at least, Millay succeeded in her broadcast performances. The persona she adopted on air as elsewhere in her public life capitalized on perceptions of Millay as being gamine and playful and she was adept at convincing her listeners that her persona was the real thing—who she really was. Furr accuses Millay of “self-consciously staging gender” (*Recorded* 89-90) in her recordings and she did. It is a matter with which a number of critics have taken issue.<sup>8</sup> But, Millay *was* conscious (at least insofar as she was able to facilitate her movement through a male-dominated field of literature) of the construction of her decidedly gendered persona. She had all the manners and conciliatory grace expected of a mid-century woman in her broadcasts and public appearances, but she also broadcast a female perspective on sex

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<sup>8</sup> Taking issue with the pseudonym Millay chose to use for her prose publications—she published a number of short stories as Nancy Boyd in the ‘20s and ‘30s—Gilbert and Gubar ask if “this poet” was ever anything but that “woman so laboriously fitted into a public costume?” The name, a play on “Nancy Boy,” “a colloquialism for ‘an effeminate man’” (*No Man’s Land* 92), upsets Gilbert and Gubar in its championing of “cute slang” in place of more overtly political discussion (92), a championing which persists, to Gilbert and Gubar’s collective dismay, in Millay’s letters to even her own family members. Ironically, Millay addresses the presence of this playful feminine persona in her letters, if rather indirectly, in the postscript to a published 1921 letter she wrote to her mother where she asks: “Do you suppose, when you & I are dead, dear, they will publish the *Love Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay & her Mother?*” (Letters 120). In essence, they did. Millay’s gamine persona was consciously adopted even in these letters and her motivation for affecting that persona even when addressing her mother did pay off—in her letters we experience exactly the kind of Millay that she wanted us to know.

and love from the celebrated position that persona afforded her. And this is where, I think, Millay's broadcasts become so interesting, her performances so radical and important. For though Millay was performing a distinctly feminine "I" in her radio broadcasts as in her off-air public persona, complicit in the expectations of her role as female poet-celebrity, she was also revolutionizing that role through her poetry. Her version of femininity was far from traditional and her listeners may have been surprised by what she had to say. In the world beyond her radio broadcasts, Millay was an unconventional and even radically sexualized female figure. She often went by her middle name, Vincent, and was openly bisexual. What is more, she wrote her poems from that perspective. For even as the period's High Modernists were attempting (or at least pretending) to make their poetry and their readings all about the text (the language in *The Waste Land* or "If I Told Him"), Millay was commodifying her public female personality in order to sell her poetry and to create a kind of female tradition of poetry out of that commodified public position.

In a 1924 article for *Poetry Magazine*, Harriet Monroe, the magazine's founder and editor, writes that, in her deceptively simple "lyrics," Millay "upsets the carefully built walls of convention which men have set up around their Ideal Woman" (263). This is apparent in many of Millay's most famous poems. "Love Is Not All" is a perfect example of the kind of deceptively transparent "feminine personality of singular charm and power" (266)—as Monroe puts it—which disrupts and reconfigures established (mis)conceptions about female agency, sexuality, and desire. The poem is, in many ways, representative of Millay's poetry; it is traditional in its form and subject matter; it is a sonnet about love. But "Love Is Not All" also puts a female speaker in the first person

position of “lover” and thus transforms the relationship between “lover” and “beloved” through the reversal of conventional gender roles. Love is not, the poem argues, enough to keep the body alive on its own:

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink  
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain; (1-2)

But the absence of love is enough to kill you:

Yet many a man is making friends with death  
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone. (7-8)

The poem is one of the most famous to have come out of *Fatal Interview* (1931), a sonnet sequence containing 52 poems which detail the dissolution of a love affair between a woman and her younger male lover.<sup>9</sup> In the above lines, the poem’s speaker—female in the poem’s original context in the sonnet sequence and in Millay’s reading because of its interpretation in her literal female voice—meditates on the role love plays in the human experience. In the last lines, Millay’s speaker says that she does not think she “would” give up “the memory of this night”—itself a suggestive line—“for food” or “peace.” But the decision to hold on to memories of love is consciously made. This speaker is not a passive female subject, the victim of her own desires or subject to the whims of her lover. She takes pleasure in her sexuality and has agency in the way she conducts herself romantically. Attributing “the image of the modern woman who is as open to sexual experiment and variety as a man” to another of Millay’s most famous sonnets, Elaine Showalter points to an incalculable but very real consequence of this kind of reorientation of the sonnet form around a female speaker. “What lips my lips have kissed,”

“memorized by thousands of women,” she writes, “was probably responsible for more seductions than bathtub gin” (Showalter 304). Poems like “Love is Not All” and “What lips my lips have kissed” may be said to have transformed contemporary conceptions of female love and emotional vulnerability. They are accessible and formally traditional, but they are also some of the clearest examples of the kind of revolutionary work Millay was doing in her poetry.

In both her poetry and her readings, Millay steps into a commodified field within which she is necessarily gendered—where the neutral position is male and the female poet must either draw attention to her marginalized perspective in order to protest that position, decentred within a tradition of inherited authority, or find a way to “pass” within that male tradition—as Stein may be said to have done, sidelining explicit questions of gender in favour of an “elite” literary career. Millay’s adherence to the rules and regulations of an inherited (primarily English) tradition of literature, her willingness to perform her gender in her public readings and on air, and her adherence to the sonnet form, far from representing her acceptance of the literary status quo, allowed her to introduce a confidently female voice directly into that tradition, to make its conventions her own. Like her modernist contemporaries who wrote “sonnets of sorts” (Howarth 226), picking apart the formal conventions of the form, Millay made self-conscious use of that literary inheritance; her poems are deeply rooted in a canonical tradition of male English poetry—her sonnet sequences especially follow in the tradition of writers like Shakespeare, Donne, Sidney, and Spenser among others (Peppe 63). But she revolutionized the sonnet through content, effecting the kind of sonnet characterized, as

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<sup>9</sup> Revealing the way fascination with Millay’s poetry as autobiography persist, almost every critic who discusses *Fatal Interview* remarks that the collection was inspired by Millay’s relationship with George



Howarth articulates, by a “sense of mismatch between a worn out form and modern content” (228). Indeed, as Howarth, showing his High Modernist bias in his concession to some of Millay’s “more successful sonnets of bohemian bed-hopping in Greenwich Village,” articulates, Millay’s sonnets “sound modern by allowing the adored but silent woman of so many male sonnets to be politely ruthless” (228). Indeed, reorienting these poems, reading them aloud, especially those with a first-person perspective, Millay did more than appropriate the conventions of a male tradition of sonneteers: she created a female tradition of literature out of those conventions. She was herself “politely ruthless.”

We cannot now know exactly which poems Millay read on air in the winter of 1932-33. Considering “the available information concerning her broadcasts,” namely the letters we have from her listeners and the one existing broadcast as a representative model, Wheeler suggests that Millay “did not select her most subversive poems for the airwaves, nor did she present herself in such a way as to challenge middle-class prejudices” (“Materializing” 243). It is unlikely, given this insight, that Millay read “What lips my lips have kissed” on air to a national audience, but Millay did read “Love is Not All” for Caedmon in 1941 with lots of gusto and expression and it was one of Millay’s most famous sonnets so it is not inconceivable that she would have read that sonnet on air as part of her WJZ program. Even in the one Sunday night recording which has survived, however, there are examples of this kind of radical poetic reorientation. For in these poems, as throughout her oeuvre, Millay steps into a male tradition of literature and appropriates its conventions for her own ends.

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Dillon. For an extended discussion of the collection’s origins see Milford (312-321).

Of the eight poems Millay reads in the single complete recording from 1933,<sup>10</sup> four are from *Fatal Interview*. Like “Love Is Not All,” which also comes from that collection, each of these sonnets reorganizes the traditional form around a female speaker. Wheeler notes that Millay’s inflection of “You say, ‘Since life is cruel enough at best’” “destabilizes rather than reinforces the printed poem’s meaning...enacting a *reluctance* to part instead of a will to closure” (*Voicing* 53). Wheeler’s close listening is interesting because it identifies an almost conciliatory tone in Millay’s poem. “You say, ‘Since life is cruel enough at best’” also foregrounds a male voice unlike any other sonnet in the sequence: the younger male beloved speaks all but “you say” and the last line and a half of the poem. But even the foregrounding of a male voice is interesting for its radical implications in such a poem. In the printed text, quotation marks frame the beloved’s excuses for ending the couple’s affair. In any reading Millay could have given of the poem, she would necessarily read that male part through her own authorial, and female, voice. Both cases make the replacement of the female speaker’s confessional sentiments with the rationalization of her male lover conspicuous. “Oh tortured voice, be still! / Spare me your premise: leave me when you will” (13-14) exclaims the female lover at the end of the poem. On the page or heard aloud, “You say” draws attention to a gendered politics of voice. In either case, Millay inverts the role of speaker and beloved and exposes the neutral male speaker of the English tradition to have been an arbitrary choice—he has no more authority in the poem than she does. Indeed, the framed presentation of his words to the listener or reader only exposes his insincerity.

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<sup>10</sup> “Not in a silver casket cool with pearls,” “Moon, that against the lintel of the west,” “You say, ‘Since life is cruel enough at best,’” and “Oh, sleep forever in a Latmian cave,” were all published in *Fatal Interview*.

Claiming that Millay “invented the image of the modern woman who is as open to sexual experiment and variety as any man, and as emotionally uninvolved,” Showalter motions towards this kind of new female canon. In a sense Showalter is offering, in this argument, a description of the late nineteenth-century New Woman. But even if Millay did not actually “invent” this woman she did publicize her on a greater scale than anyone else in the 1920s or 30s. Indeed, she gave that woman, that tradition, to thousands of listeners every week through her broadcasts alone. Both Furr and Wheeler have commented on Millay’s relationship with radio being apt in terms of the emphasis on aural rhythms (as opposed to visual metaphors) in her poems and in terms of her fascination with “voice” as an aesthetic mode of communication. Furr, in particular, points to Millay’s preoccupation with her throat as an aesthetic highlight of her figure and as the source of “the mechanisms of voice production” (*Recorded* 87). But voice seems, in a very concrete way, to be tied to ideas of both community and of communication in Millay’s poetry. Too young to have played a role in the suffrage movement herself, Millay was nonetheless deeply invested in the shifting outlook of women’s rights in the early twentieth century. In 1915 she wrote her family excitedly to tell them that she had met “the great suffragist” Inez Milholland (qtd. in Milford 127).<sup>11</sup> Eight years later, Millay read a sonnet about the iconic woman’s passing at the unveiling of “a statue of three leaders in the cause of Equal Rights for Women” (epigraph to the poem). The poem is far too politically charged to have been broadcast on air, but it provides an important key for understanding Millay’s public influence. For though Millay almost certainly did not read “Inez Milholland” on air, she did read the poem aloud to a live audience at the

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<sup>11</sup> Inez Milholland was to die one year later in 1916. Ironically, Millay would later marry Milholland’s widower, a not-so-successful businessman from an important Dutch family (173, 263).

unveiling, citing in the poem itself the power of a female voice to effect political or social change and to mobilize a female population into thinking of themselves as significant individuals. The poem even uses the language of the war hero's "silenced cry" (line 3) and borrows the diction of a romantic tradition of male heroism to mourn "I, that was proud and valiant" (5). Millay's own message of the sexually liberated New Woman was not nearly as politically fraught as Milholland's real political speeches had been, but Millay did speak to a large female audience in her broadcasts, communicating an ideology of sexual liberation and female agency to male and female listeners alike. In this sense at least, Millay too engaged in the circulation of an oral-female tradition of social mobilization.

And she did so, in 1932 and 1933, with all of the authority of the major broadcast network which aired her program, with the consent, even the support, of the mass market machine. As her program's producer, Margaret Cuthbert, observed in a letter some years after the poet's eight-week stint, Millay's relationship with the medium was exceptional because it placed her "on an equal footing with dramatic performers and distinguished concert artists" (Milford 367). In *Women's Poetry and Popular Culture* Marsha Bryant pushes the significance of this authoritative "equal footing" one step farther, arguing that female poets who "tap popular forms to mimic, to add depth, and scope... write from the cultural center as *insiders*" and that these "popular registers transgress our usual sense of women's poetry as an oppositional aesthetic, a counter-discourse" (2). Certainly this was true of Millay. Where Stein, Eliot, Pound, and others turned away from the mass market culture of the twentieth century, engaging radio only in strategic and deliberately distanced ways, encouraging a New Critical approach to reading and understanding their

texts divorced from perceptions of their own personas, Millay did the opposite. She embraced the broadcast medium wholeheartedly and used it to popularize herself to a mass audience of both men and women, of impressionable children and their parents, of rural and urban, educated and lay-listeners. What is more, Millay capitalized on the blurred distinction between public and private spheres inherent to the broadcast medium: she spoke as an authoritative public figure directly *inside* her listeners' homes and turned that public communication into a private counter-discourse of sorts. She made her audience feel that they were *inside* with her, that she was familiar to them, and that her poetic message was also theirs. Her podium of social mobilization was abstract but it was authoritative and the size of her audience was unprecedented.

She was not, however, in complete control of her on-air personality. In the ten years following her 1932-33 broadcast program, Millay became increasingly politically minded. When Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants identified as anarchists who had been charged with murder in 1920 were sentenced to death, Millay used her celebrity to contact various high-ranking officials. When that failed to reverse what many believe was an unfair sentence, doled out by a biased judge, Millay joined picketers outside the public court house in Boston and was arrested for her efforts (Milford 297-99). After the tragic conclusion of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial in 1927, Millay wrote one of her most famous political poems, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" which the New York *World* then published on August 22 of that year. This was not the last time Millay had problems with law enforcement: when she spoke out against wage inequality and "the profit system" in a 1934 newspaper interview the FBI, who Milford notes had been following the poet's movements "lackadaisically since she had given one dollar to

buy Soviet tractors back in 1920” (387), started tracking her activities in earnest. The poem in question was perhaps, however, the first time she put her poetry to explicit use to effect the kind of change she could not. “Justice Denied in Massachusetts,” though it is Millay’s most famous political poem, is fairly abstract. It recalls Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” in its exclamation of a “Forlorn, forlorn” (3.16) longing for a better world where “Evil does overwhelm / The larkspur and the corn” (4.27-28), but does not reference the trial or execution explicitly. Many of the poems in *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, a collection Millay published in 1939, are more explicit. “I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death” (1) she writes in “Conscientious Objector,” of 1934, expressing her commitment to pacifism, inspired by political turmoil in a number of regions across the world:

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his pay-roll.  
I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.  
Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man’s  
door. (8-10)

In “Say that We Saw Spain Die” (1939), dramatizing the death of that “O splendid bull” (line 1) in place of its homeland, she laments:

Say that we saw the shoulders more than the mind confused, so profusely  
Bleeding from so many more than the accustomed barbs, the game gone  
vulgar, the rules abused. (10-11)

Throughout *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, Millay continues the political trend evident in some of her earlier work. She addresses the coming of the Second World War, Fascism, the crises in Czechoslovakia, and the Spanish Civil War.

That Millay's poetry reflected her evolving political passions reinforces the idea that she was pioneering her own counter-discourse through that popularly circulated work. But as her poetry trod an ever-fainter line between art and propaganda, as Milford observes (471), the audience which had pledged its loyalty to her following her on-air readings in the early '30s began to abandon her. As Showalter points out, "Millay tried to incorporate political concerns into her writings in the 1930s, but critics and readers were fixated by her image as the romantic lyric poet, and when the audience that wanted her to remain a romantic icon abandoned her, Millay suffered a series of breakdowns" (Showalter 333). While her unconventional ideas about gender and female sexuality could be framed as sensational by-products of her "girl poet" personality, rendering them harmless and charming, her opinions about international politics undercut popularly held opinions of who Millay was. The complicit relationship with radio's commodifying celebrity machine, which had given Millay the very platform from which she could speak to national audiences, also limited her opportunities for artistic growth. Millay did tour with the more overtly political collections she published in the 1930s (Furr *Recorded* 88); people still came out to see her read, and she did make various radio appearances in the years to follow, but Millay's relationship with her audience seems to have shifted indelibly once she stopped fitting the model established by her early career and by the radio broadcasts which popularized that personality on a national scale.

The effect of this new gulf between Millay and her audience had its effects on the poet. When, in 1939, she appeared on a broadcast special called "The Challenge to Civilization," to discuss the state of America's political affairs, she is reported to have been much changed from her earlier broadcast-self. Millay's performance in this

broadcast had little in common with the on-air performances she had given six years earlier. Hosted by the *Herald Tribune* through the WJZ New York network, the program paired Millay with the president of Harvard. He was the first speaker, she the second. Introducing Millay as “an American possession,” a poet who “does not live in an ivory tower” who has also “been called the greatest woman poet since Sappho,” the program’s host capitalized on all of the qualities which had made Millay’s earlier broadcasts successful: her accessibility, her value as a cultural commodity, and the sense that she was both like her listeners and an extraordinary talent. Indeed, the very fact that Millay was invited to discuss American politics alongside James Conant speaks to the continued authority of her voice. But Millay spoke, in this late broadcast, according to Milford, in what the biographer describes as a “high” and “rather clipped” voice, altogether different from her 1932-33 broadcasts and from the recordings she was to do two years later for Caedmon. Her message, moreover, was uncharacteristically pessimistic: “As patriotic American citizens,” she says, “[we each have a responsibility to take advantage] of this fine free speech of ours” (qtd. in Milford 435), the implication perhaps being the American populace had, up to that point, been failing to do so. Millay’s relationship with her audience and with the American populace more generally does not depict a perfect linear progression from enchantment to disillusionment—her Caedmon recordings more closely resemble the tone of her existing 1932-33 broadcasts than they do this temporally proximate on-air appearance—but the shift from one broadcast appearance to the next bears untangling. Because she was so dependent on the kind of admiration and acceptance she had experienced in the 1920s and in her earlier broadcasts, the combined turmoil Millay experienced over the Spanish Civil War and development of Nazism in



Hitler's Germany combined with feelings of artistic alienation from her audience to influence Millay's well being. She developed, in this period, an ever more problematic relationship with alcohol and prescription drugs. "It is impossible not to feel," notes Milford of the 1939 broadcast, "that while Millay was describing the condition in which America found itself, she was also describing her own condition" (Milford 435). Millay closed her speech by reading "Underground System" from *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (Milford 434-35). "Ease has demoralized us" (9) claims the poem. "All will be well, we say; it is a habit" (11). It was the beginning of the end for Millay's popular reputation.

Because this period coincided with the publication of John Crowe Ransom's now famous diatribe against Millay and female poets more generally, it is tempting to trace a straight line of causation from Millay's un-feminine interest in global politics to her disappearance from the scene of public adoration, to write that her position as cultural "insider" could only carry her so far before she was "systematically marginalized" (Bryant 2) according to what Melissa Bradshaw identifies as "a predictable part of female celebrity" (Bradshaw 4) whereby "powerful female celebrities are often denigrated by the same public that once flocked to them" (3). And, to a certain extent, all of these things are true. As was discussed above, the fickle population of the mass consumer market balked at their favourite female bard taking up serious issues without her usual screen of sensuality or sentimentality. But the seeds of that turn in popular sympathies had been present since the beginning of Millay's career. Complaining, as early as 1924, of feeling "like a prostitute" in a letter to her husband, Millay details two readings she had given the day before:

the one in the afternoon at Evanston was a great success - crowded house, large audience, etc. —But the one in the evening was a private house! —A bunch of wealthy people come together to see what I looked like, & bet with each other as to how many of my naughty poems I would dare to read. (*Letters* 181)

The fact that Millay distinguishes in this letter between one reading and the other is interesting; even here we see the difference between the commodification of Millay's presence for the sake of her poetry and the commodification of her persona for the sake of sensation. But the difference is slight. While she writes that the second reading was truly terrible, she also concedes that even there she met "sweet & real people, & intelligent"; she expresses her gratitude for a "few women" who came up to talk to her and "one man" who knew a number of her poems "by heart"; she seems particularly pleased that the man's seventeen year old daughter is purported to have memorized a number of her poems as well. "But on the whole—oh, Jesus! [...] I kept saying to myself [...] 'Never mind—it's a hundred & fifty dollars.' —I hope I shall never write another poem again that more than five people will like" (*Letters* 181). The contradictory mixture of emotions expressed in this letter point to one of the fundamental problems Millay faced as a popular and "sentimental" poet. Shaping her career to appeal to popular audiences, Millay gave those audiences power over not just her career but also over Millay's relationship to her own readings.

In some ways, the sentiments expressed in this letter speak to one of the fundamental differences between public readings and radio broadcasts: both may give the impression of putting the poet in the room with his or her audience, only in the public

reading is the poet actually exposed to her audience's expectations and reactions. As George Orwell writes in "Poetry and the Microphone," one of the great advantages of radio broadcasting for the poet is the fact that "it is reasonable to assume that your audience is sympathetic, or at least interested, for anyone who is bored can promptly switch you off by turning the knob... *the audience has no power over you*" (377). Millay seems to have been genuinely pleased to be reaching an appreciative (especially female) audience of lay readers in these readings as in her broadcasts and did enjoy being an object of fascination as well as an artist of distinguished literary reputation: she kept giving readings for another two decades after the letter was written. But Millay's letter also identifies a certain naivety, a susceptibility to the way audiences' regarded that commodified personality as an object of fascination rather than as a serious artistic endeavour, deserving of attention and respect. This susceptibility would no doubt only have become amplified following Millay's broadcasts for which she had only received feedback from listeners enthusiastic enough to write in—especially since the letters arrived to Millay via Margaret Cuthbert who would have removed any less-than-flattering addresses.

## CHAPTER 4: Reading Aural Influence

Given this complex interplay of complicity and agency evident in Millay's relationship with radio broadcasting, live readings, and with the mass media culture of the early twentieth century more generally, it can be difficult to know what to do with her critically. She self-identified as a feminist and used her role as "girl poet" to operate as a cultural insider, writing a female canon of literature out of the male tradition and broadcasting it to a wide, lay audience. But she was also limited within that role and reinforced other stereotypes of her gender. In her discussion of poetic "divadom" (158) Melissa Bradshaw writes:

Women like Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and... [Amy] Lowell, tempered their intellectualism with the cultivation of a self-consciously feminine, crafted self. They saw themselves, above all, as artists. However, these most visible women, at once performers and public intellectuals, wittingly or unwittingly, reified and promoted cultural ideologies and agendas. (24)

Certainly the very fact that she did dress in gowns, flirt with her audience, and read radio-appropriate poems seems to reinforce Bradshaw's claim. Even by accommodating her listeners' requests that she read specific poems, which gave them a feeling of two-way communication, Millay gave up a certain degree of control over public perceptions of her persona. By writing in the traditional forms which allowed her to articulate a new female tradition of lyric experience in the English canon, she invited accusations of "sentimentality" and unoriginality. We cannot, however, make the mistake of reading Millay's feminism retrospectively. In "Displaced Modernism," Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

argues that “Male modernists struggled to professionalize literature and literary study in order to create a gulf between themselves and women writers, whom they then labelled as mere amateurs” (37). Gendered already by her sex and traditional poetry, by the sentimentality of her early work in particular, Millay faced an uphill battle as a young female poet at the end of the First World War. The kind of ruinous accusation of sentimentality which eventually erased her from critical engagements of the 1920s and 30s was not exclusive to female poets—Robert Frost may also be said to have been “gendered” female by his relationship with the twentieth century’s mass culture and by his celebration as a popular poet in that era, at least in the sense that he too was excluded from critical purview, considered too simple for study, after the Second World War<sup>12</sup>—but it was the exploitation of that “femininity” which first allowed Millay to succeed. Given the kind of poetry she was writing, she was never going to have been accepted into the High Modernist school of poetry in the first place.

Part of the problem with studying Millay in the twenty first century therefore lies in what Marsha Bryant identifies as the current misconception that “women poets who incorporate popular culture,” or who participate actively in popular culture, “always compose parodies or critiques” (2) of that culture and that “the poems [of female poets] must criticise mass media to be taken seriously as women’s poetry” (4). Reaching both men and women with poems about female love, sexuality, and intellectual prowess, she

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<sup>12</sup> Frost’s career parallels Millay’s in a number of interesting ways. “America’s best known poet,” one of the few literary celebrities writing in the mid twentieth century who surpassed Millay in terms of popular acclaim, Frost too read his poetry on air and in public to large audiences. His recitation “at John F. Kennedy’s televised presidential inauguration in 1961” was what Bob Perlman calls “the high-water mark of cultural prestige for poetry in America” (111). Yet Frost too, underwent a period of critical marginalization in the decades following about 1950 (though not to the same degree as Millay) and was similarly denigrated by High Modernist writers and critics: both Eliot and Thomas dismissed his poetry directly (Diepeveen 178, 192). Like Millay again, the study of Frost’s work is undergoing a renaissance in the twenty-first century.

transformed herself into a public female intellectual. She was a hugely talented poet (you can't write that many perfect sonnets without some degree of talent) and an influential literary figure who was, I would like to argue, as conscious—if not, perhaps, as “canny”—in the construction of her career as were the Modernist poets with whom she has been replaced. More importantly, though she may have “unwittingly reified and promoted” certain “cultural ideologies and agendas” (Bradshaw 24) regarding gender norms especially, Millay also challenged a number of assumptions regarding female agency and sexuality in the ways discussed above.

It is impossible to measure, with any degree of accuracy, the true scope of the influence Millay's poetry and radio broadcasts had on the development of gender relations or on the development of female poetry throughout the later half of the twentieth century—how many seductions she was responsible for, exactly. Her audience, like the broadcasts themselves, was ephemeral, leaving little trace behind them except for the short notes they wrote to thank her for her on-air presence. Writing about Millay's social importance in 1936, in the first book ever published about the poet, Elizabeth Atkins claims that, though Millay was not the greatest talent of the age, she embodied the “*Zeitgeist*” (vii) of the 1930s: “Everyone recognizes that Millay represents our time to itself, much as Tennyson represented the period of Victoria to itself, or Byron the period of Romanticism” (Atkins vii), she affirms. This statement is interesting firstly for the fact that it no longer seems to be true, but also for what it says about Millay's foothold in the mainstream consciousness of twentieth-century society going into the mid century. Millay's poetry was, for a time at least, forgotten by the critical institutions of literature, but because of the way radio circulates in a culture, her broadcasts in particular and her

career, more generally, were in fundamental ways, productive of dialogue, of debate, and of poetry: noting in passing, while discussing the influx of fan letters following Millay's 1932-33 broadcasts that listeners sent Millay their own poems, poems which they had written having been inspired by her broadcasts to write, Milford uncovers an important key to understanding the "girl poet's" legacy. "Systematically marginalized" though she has been, Millay was, in unquantifiable ways, remembered "by heart" (*Millay Letters* 181) throughout much of the twentieth century. As Melissa Bradshaw observes, "the more we read a poem, the more it becomes ours" (Bradshaw 24). The more it becomes ours, the more we can put it to use in our own quotidian lives.

In "Uncanny Millay," Clark argues that Millay's impact on the culture of twentieth-century America was largely unconscious (25). To my mind, Millay's radio broadcasts represent one of the most potent means through which this unconscious impact may have occurred. I would like to propose Millay's participation in the mass market, her radio broadcasts and recordings in particular, as the starting point for this change in the social unconscious—a change in the twentieth century's inherent idea of who or what a poet must be. Indeed, even if a young person never read Millay's poetry or heard her voice themselves, as of the mid-1930s every child in America was growing up in a country that had celebrated a female perspective in poetry on a national scale. For a future generation of female poets, especially, this literary precedent has to have been, in incalculable and largely unacknowledged ways, invaluable. Evidencing the kind of familiar relationship reinforced by Millay's broadcasts, Genevieve Taggard once wrote of her predecessor that she was "the only girl that's at all like us" (qtd. in Showalter 305). In like fashion Dorothy Parker once told an interviewer that, "like everyone else... I was

following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers” (qtd. in Showalter 306). Not all of the poets who looked to Millay as a female predecessor admired her in such an unqualified way, however. Indeed, poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, though similarly well acquainted with Millay’s work and reputation—Sexton admitted in the early 50s that until “two years ago I had never heard of any poet but Edna St. Vincent” (qtd. in Michailidou 123) —had a more ambiguous, at times ambivalent, relationship with the older poet: Plath was “determined not to write ‘simple lyrics like Millay,’” and Sexton was afraid of becoming her (Gilbert and Gubar *No Man’s Land* 74). But Sexton, especially, became “less reluctant” later in her career “to acknowledge publicly the influence of Millay on her work” (Michailidou 122). These poets had an oftentimes ambiguous relationship with Millay. But the very fact that each struggled with her intention to not become Millay speaks to the older poet’s influence and presence in the younger generation’s collective consciousness.

Despite her critical marginalization following the Second World War, Millay looms large over the literary canon of the twentieth century. She was inherited by the next generation of (especially female) poets and became a key figure for combating what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as not an “anxiety of influence” but rather an “anxiety of authorship” (*Madwoman* 51) in the historical progression of literature written by women from one century to the next. Millay’s relationship with mass culture transformed her into a female Tennyson or Byron, a monumentally popular predecessor against whom a subsection of the next generation could rebel—even if, unlike either of these male poets, the rest gradually forgot about her altogether. Millay’s voice, broadcast to national audiences, transcribed on the page, and sold in remarkable quantities, was in



some ways the voice of a generation—one of the voices which bridged the gap between feminist politics and mainstream perceptions of gender in the 1920s and 30s. In poems like “Memorial to D.C.,” which Millay wrote upon the death of her friend and fellow poet, Dorothy Coleman, who died while the girls were both at Vassar in 1918, Millay demonstrates an overriding preoccupation with poetic voice, seeming to anticipate the fate of her own poetic utterances over the course of the century to come:

But your voice... never the rushing<sup>13</sup>  
Of a river underground  
Not the rising of the wind  
...  
Shall content my musing mind  
For the beauty of that sound  
That in no new way at all  
Ever will be heard again. (5. 12-14, 21-24)

This voice, like the poet who uttered it, is mortal. And gone. In the epigraph to the same poem, Millay mourns:

*O, loveliest throat of all sweet throats*  
*Where now no more the music is.* (emphasis in the original, lines 1-2)

At once unsettling and uncanny in its invocation of the poet’s throat as the husk of her talent, this passage points towards the simultaneous promise and the fundamental lie of radio broadcasting: recording a poet’s voice promises to prolong their poetic voice beyond them; but that voice ceases to belong to them the moment they address their audience. It is a cruel twist of fate that the very ephemeral quality of Millay’s broadcasts,

that which makes them so difficult to recuperate and study today, was also one of their greatest strengths. For they were events unto themselves. Tied to the moments in which Millay spoke them—if not by their actual disappearance then by our shifting perception of Millay’s sentimental and sincere delivery—these readings belong to their first audience in a way that they cannot belong to the twenty-first century listener. But this in itself has power. Reading Millay’s “Inez Milholland” sonnet retrospectively, in light of Millay’s own historically silenced voice, her concluding line becomes a kind of eerie but apt request: “Take up the song; forget the epitaph” (line 14).

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<sup>13</sup> ellipses in the original.

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Any discussion of Millay's career must grapple with the extremes of her reputation. But perhaps looking at the constructed nature of "modernism" through a poet who adheres to none of the markers of greatness laid out by that tradition has something to contribute to a wider discussion about the way we judge literary merit and about the way we can best understand the way literature works socially in a quickly evolving post-modern world. As Diepeveen argues, "unless we re-examine" modernism's allegiance to "an aesthetics of difficulty," "and the ways in which it continues to control contemporary culture, we are doomed to accept its benefits and its costs" (xv). Millay does not fit into the canon of modern literature as it stands today. But to measure her by the yardstick of that canon does her a disservice and obscures the true scale of her literary contribution. If Millay is a Freudian "(m)other" of Modernism, as Clark suggests she is, one who had to be thrown off for the literature of the era to move forward, she was at least cognizant of her role in what Gilbert and Gubar ironically call the "family plot" of the century (*No Man's Land* xv). She reframed the twentieth-century literary family around herself by accepting the categorization of overt femininity and girlishness thrust upon her, but resisted following the prescribed trajectory of that role: in addition to going by her middle name and carrying on overtly sexual relationships with members of both sexes, Millay remained childless throughout her life. Her poetry may have been formally conventional but she was not and to study the way she introduced the more unconventional undertones of her persona and poetry to the public sphere of the literary community may help us to better understand the complex discourses of aesthetic difficulty and power shaping the twentieth century literary canon and what we overlook when we limit our scholarly

explorations of the period to those poets who fulfill High Modernist requirements for artistic merit. When Millay first heard her own voice played back to her, she paused.

“Quite lovely, isn’t it?” (qtd in Milford 368). To a certain extent that was the whole point.

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## Appendix A

“Latest for Housewives – Radio in the Kitchen Cabinet.” *Modern Mechanix* (1932)

### Latest for Housewives—Radio in the Kitchen Cabinet



**T**HE last word in modern equipment for the kitchen would make Old Mother Hubbard turn over in her grave. This modernity is nothing less than an all electric broadcast receiver built into a kitchen cabinet, as shown in the accompanying photo.

Concealed neatly just behind the table, and finished in harmony with the rest of the cabinet, the set is easily accessible, always ready to tell the housewife the latest cooking recipes and the latest song hits to keep her cheerful. The apparatus is of the latest design, reproducing the programs with the utmost fidelity.

Radio receiver, neatly concealed in the kitchen cabinet, brings to the housewife latest cooking recipes as well as the latest song hits to keep her cheerful on the job.

Text:

THE last word in modern equipment for the kitchen would make Old Mother Hubbard turn over in her grave. This modernity is nothing less than an all electric broadcast receiver built into a kitchen cabinet, as shown in the accompanying photo.

Concealed neatly just behind the table, and finished in harmony with the rest of the cabinet, the set is easily accessible, always ready to tell the housewife the latest cooking recipes and the latest song hits to keep her cheerful. The apparatus is of the latest design, reproducing the programs with the utmost fidelity.