

Spring 2014

# Edna St. Vincent Millay: Artisan of Violent Feminine Agency

Carolina Galdiz

*Trinity College*, [carolina.galdiz@trincoll.edu](mailto:carolina.galdiz@trincoll.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Galdiz, Carolina, "Edna St. Vincent Millay: Artisan of Violent Feminine Agency". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2014.  
Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/389>

TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY:  
ARTISAN OF VIOLENT FEMININE AGENCY

submitted by

Carolina Galdiz 2014

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2014

Director: Daniel Mrozowski, Ph.D.  
Reader: Clare Rossini, Ph.D.  
Reader: David Rosen, Ph.D.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Introduction	ii
<i>Artisan Of Violent Feminine Agency</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Between the Wars</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Logics of Violence</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Road Map</i>	<i>xxi</i>
Chapter 1: External Violence	1
<i>Rewriting Western Cultural Expression</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Not Just Your Average Modernist</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Violence of Familiarity in the Sonnet, Fairytale, and Myth</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>26</i>
Chapter 2: Internal Violence	28
<i>Articulations of Violence Within the Self</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Psychoanalytic Theory and the Boundlessly Extending Inward Self</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Discovering Agency and Self-worth Through Internal Violence</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>50</i>
Conclusion	52
Works Cited	57

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who made this thesis possible.

It is difficult to overstate my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Dan Mrozowski, who first introduced me to Edna St. Vincent Millay, and whose undying enthusiasm, warmhearted encouragement, and inspiring challenges stimulated the development and growth of this project.

I would like to thank some of the many people who taught me about and fostered my love for literature: my high school English teachers and mentors (especially, Stella Schindler, Leonor Limarzi, and Amy Devere), and my undergraduate English professors (especially, Milla Riggio, Barbara Benedict, Okey Ndibe, and Sheila Fisher).

I am indebted to my roommates, friends, and teammates for filling this journey with laughs and good company, and for reassuring me in times of doubt. My siblings (Julia, Nico, Mia, and Luke) deserve special mention for their blind devotion and cheerful energy that helped me keep perspective over the course of this process.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Isabel and George Galdiz, who have always provided a loving environment for me and who raised me to believe in myself and my goals. This project could never have been completed without the tenacity and perseverance they have instilled in me since birth.

## INTRODUCTION

## ARTISAN OF VIOLENT FEMININE AGENCY

For decades, scholars have understood Edna St. Vincent Millay in two fairly distinctive patterns as either a classical romanticist or an ephemeral rebel. This dual reputation has been crafted from the obvious presence of natural imagery, sexual dynamism, feminine voice, and romantic yearning. She plays in the classical romanticist in such poems as “When you, that at this moment are to me,” “Time does not bring relief; you all have lied,” “I know I am but summer to your heart,” and “What lips my lips have kissed.” These poems are laden with natural imagery and are narrated from an undeniably, and sometimes even stereotypically, feminine voice. They are sentimentalist, narrating love stories and articulating romantic yearning and heartbreak.

Her mode of the ephemeral rebel, on the other hand, is manifested in her erotic poetry. These poems are laden with imagery of the female body, and blatant disregard for authority. In them, she remembers sexual escapades, announces future conquests, and assumes total sovereignty over herself due to her ability to completely detach from her lovers emotionally. This canon includes such poems as: “I, being born a woman and distressed,” “Loving you less than life, a little less,” “I think I should have loved you presently,” “Thou are not lovelier than lilacs, – no,” “First Fig,” and “Oh, oh you will be sorry for that word!”

Although not altogether inaccurate, this narrowly framed exploration of her work by such critics as Christopher Beach, John Crowe Ransom, and C.C. Barfoot, among

others, does not do justice to the complexity of Millay's poetic project. Christopher Beach's Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry categorizes her work as stereotypically feminine, calling it an "idiom that was more emotionally expressive than it was intellectually challenging" (Beach 74). Along this same vein, John Crowe Ransom condemned Millay's work as being "intellectually underdeveloped" and a "sentimental and feminine exercise" in his 1937 article titled "The Poet As Woman" (Ransom 790). He spends the majority of the article condemning Elizabeth Atkins' celebratory critical analysis of Millay in her book, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times. In doing so, Ransom's evaluation of Millay becomes mostly an exercise of defining her by what she is not, or rather, what she falls short of being. Her worst flaw, the flaw upon which Ransom predicated his smug and sexist attack, is that she is not a man. He explains: "Less pliant, safer...she remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and indifferent to intellectuality," later defining intellect as

pure thought engaging in a series of technical or abstract processes. The greatest impulse behind them, doubtless, is scientific and systematic...To be intellectual is to be disciplined in technique and stocked with learning, a very great advantage for every purpose, and even for fertilizing the pleasures of imagination. (Ransom 790)

In focusing on the ways in which her femininity manifests in intellectual shortcomings, and crafting his argument in a way that merely compares her to her male predecessors and contemporaries, he misses the opportunity to truly engage with her writing. He gets too caught up in chastising her for not being the same as Donne and Pound, among others, and puts forth an unproductive and inaccurate analysis of her work.

Most obviously, Ransom errs in his characterization of Millay's efforts as "indifferent to intellectuality" per his own definition of intellect above. Her poetic project works at both the formal and thematic levels to address the very essence and consequences of systematic impulse in society, which he describes as "pure thought." Further, the breadth and depth of the allusions that pervade her work is impressive by any standards. She gestures towards numerous forms, styles, and genres that have preceded her. Thus, Ransom's attempt to dismiss Millay as shallow and not intellectual is possible only because his basis for judgment is how she compares with other "objectively" great poets, rather than if she herself meets his definition of intellect.

In a similarly misguided analytical execution, C.C. Barfoot, who opens her essay claiming: "I will attempt to deliberately refrain from referring to any knowledge I may or may not have about her life, her life-style, her reception and reputation, her literary career" in hopes that it would facilitate "a more concentrated effort" to "understand the work" itself, starts her analysis at Millay's sonnet: "I, being born a woman and distressed" (Barfoot 82). Barfoot's conscious decision to open her analysis with such a fragrantly feminist and rebellious poem prevents the reader from looking beyond this image of Millay as Barfoot moves to other sonnets. Even her discussion of "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines," a sonnet, which, as we will later see, is an ideal entry-point into other productive analytical lenses for Millay's work, reduces Millay to a helpless woman who attempts to seize control through her writing because her reality denies her this agency. Barfoot writes:

all the Chaos that she was engaged with and intent on expressing and probing in  
her own life, her 'angish; pride' and burning thought/ And lust,' and the confusion

of misplaced energies, and continual threats of disaster she observed about her, for which she could not find solutions. She could neither change herself or the world, but she could strive with her superb art to ensure that the Chaos both without and within ‘mingles and combines’ with Order. (Barfoot 90)

Barfoot’s understanding of this sonnet, is not only completely incongruous with her initial claim that she will base her analysis on the text itself, rather than outside context, but also totally vague about that oppressive structures that Millay was apparently up against. It also undersells the power of literature to identify, criticize, and influence social structures.

Thus while there is a wide scholarship of the romanticist and rebellious tendencies of Millay’s poetry, critics have failed to see the potent sinister undertones that claim violence as a means to power. Using violence theory as an entry point to her poetry illuminates her historical context and her connection with other modernist poets, wherein emerges a useful dialogue for understanding her project: constructing a feminine violence, which she claims as a means to power and agency. Millay’s analysis of violence in institutions draws authority from the Western cultural impulse to attribute the responsibility and power of childrearing to the mother, to women. It is the mother who is responsible for creating the identity of her offspring in every sense: she physically bears her children into the world, emotionally nurtures them, and shapes their personalities. She has the absolute trust and faith of her children because they are completely dependent upon her. Thus, the mother has an unparalleled amount of power in the shaping of young minds. However, this fundamentally creative feminine role can have violent



implications, especially in the presence of patriarchal structures, in which creative and destructive elements are forced to “mingle and combine” (Millay, *Collected Sonnets* 153)

The result of this interaction manifests in violence that seeks to psychologically reform the outliers, who are defined as such by patriarchal structures. Thus, the task of disciplining violence entails the meeting of two conflicting modes of power: the feminine creative energy of nurturing to potential, with the masculine expectations of abiding to a certain patriarchal structure at the threat of physical harm. Additionally, it is important to mention that institutions shape members of society on the grander scale. Thus, these institutions reconcile the feminine with the masculine modes of power. The different forms of violence that preceded Millay, and those that began to take root contemporaneously with Millay’s life, can be understood through the lens of three violence theorists, which I will detail below.

I will argue that Millay narrates the gendered struggle that takes place in this violence, in order to ultimately assert feminine agency in the process forming of a cultural identity. This project is only natural given her historical context; Millay was writing in the time between the two World Wars, a time in which violence was a looming preoccupation of American society. As such, it is logical that this societal anxiety, which crafted her reality and influenced her writing, should emerge powerfully in her poetry. I term her representation of this historical anxiety “gentle violence.” Thus, rather than focus on the undeniable presence of romanticist and rebellious tendencies in her poetry as her central project, I propose that these tendencies serve as tools in her broader, less acknowledged identity as an artisan of violent feminine agency.

In part, Millay's work was set against a historic backdrop of numbness among Americans. Her poetry and articulation of a feminine violence, then, were intended to shock people into feeling, to challenge them to rethink social problems, and to nurture them into a new understanding of social structures. In this sense, she was not so different from some of the male war poets she succeeded. Frustrated at the apathy of his tired British countrymen, Wilfred Owen, who fought on the Western Front between January 1917 and November 1918, produced a body of vivid and gruesome war poems (Owen 11). He explored the new experience of war from behind powerful weapons and machinery, which seemed to provide humans with a new capacity to hurt each other without assuming responsibility. Soldiers could hide behind these machines, in the same way that, per Michel Foucault's theories, individuals in power work through institutions, and anonymously inflict damage. With the rise of chemical weapons and machine guns, the flip of a single trigger could kill dozens of people. Killing no longer had the personal, essentially brutal, element of hand-to-hand combat, but the experience of death remained profoundly disturbing.

In one of his most famous poems, "Dulce et Decorum Est," he recounts the experience of watching one of his comrades die at the hands of gas. This poem is a plea to his countrymen to internalize the damaging effects of war. Like Millay, and in true World War I modernist form-rejecting fashion, Owen modifies the sonnet form. His poem links together two fourteen line sections that could presumably stand alone: the first from "Bent double" to "I saw him drowning," and the second from "In all my dreams" to "Pro patria mori." Examining the poem from this perspective, and dividing it into these two pieces allows for a fruitful cause and effect analysis. If we understand the

first half as being an articulation of Slavoj Zizek's subjective violence of war, then the second half describes the psychological implications of this violence on those who experience it first hand. Thus, the modification of the sonnet serves the functional role of proposing that there is no simple solution to war; it takes two sonnets, two runs through the form that seeks to articulate resolution, in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Also like Millay, Owens intends to shock his public into feeling, though his tactics for doing so are far different. In contrast to the intensely psychological dimension we will observe in Millay's thrust towards feeling, Owens narrates an overtly masculine and physical experience of violent death:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
 And toward our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!--An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori. (Owen 36)

There is nothing glamorous or desirable about the life Owen describes on the Western Front; the soldiers are weary, and live monotonously between gas attack crises. They appear completely devoid of feeling until the gas strikes, to which they respond with rehearsed promptness: organized chaos. Their response to their dying comrade appears just as immediate and rehearsed. The tone of the narration of his last moments is graphic, but detached. The narrator sees, but doesn't process. The scene is a caricature of itself; everything is exaggerated for the purpose of shocking the audience. With the dramatic change of narrative pace and passion after the first stanza, Owen mirrors the effect he is trying to evoke from his tired audience. He hopes that upon reading this, they will be shocked into sympathizing for the soldiers and understand their daily experience of raw violence that is often disregarded.

His sensory description gets all of the senses involved; he relays smells, sights, sounds, and sensations. Interestingly, his retelling of the evidence submits that he had no emotional response to this violent situation as it was unfolding. Rather, it was his lack of emotional response that seems to haunt him now. He did not act with human compassion towards his comrade because he could not process the death for what it was as it was happening.

In this sense, the death is as dehumanizing of an experience for the narrator, as it is for their enemy. In the physical absence of an enemy, whose presence is only apparent in the consequences of the gas they sent, there is an emergent vacuum in the place where

war heroes had once stood as emblems of manhood and masculinity. This resulted in a culture that was vulnerable to new ideologies, or in the words of Foucault, “discourses” to emerge. These discourses included such schools of thought as fascism, structures of American racism, and contours of patriarchy: new modes of conceiving of the way society should be organized hierarchically and oppressively.

It is these discourses that become what Slavoj Zizek refers to as objective violence; and what Millay both challenges and seeks to revise in her confrontation with the state of numbness and vulnerability in which the American people found themselves. Her work, like Owen’s, draws upon institutional and linguistic violence as a means to reconnect us with our emotional lives. Unlike Owen, however, Millay discusses, employs, and explores psychological violence and how this violence is wielded both externally and internally. The most useful terms for understanding the distinction between Owen’s masculine violence and Millay’s feminine violence are those developed by Slavoj Zizek, which I will formally introduce and explain in the next section.

#### LOGICS OF VIOLENCE

Millay’s conceptualization of violence is undeniably gendered, relying largely upon the concepts and constructions of femininity and masculinity in Western culture. She draws upon a conceptualization of woman as creative and the reliance on women to raise the next generation in order to explain the ways in which institutional violence seeks to influence the next generation. To this end, she uses maternal and feminine creative authority as a metaphor for institutional or objective violence. In doing so, she appropriates a mode of violence classically understood as masculine, given the way that its power manifests itself oppressively in Western patriarchal society. For her the

significance of these institutions is not necessarily their masculine oppressive strategies, but rather their psychologically disciplining and conditioning functions: their role in creating a certain kind of society. With these concepts in mind, this section will outline the roots of these specifically Western conceptions of gender, and provide three theorizations of violence, all of which will frame my discussion of Millay's poetic project.

Western mythology has traditionally conceived of feminine cultural agency in terms of creation. Prominent French feminist writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous, narrates the biblical events that took place in the Garden of Eden in her work "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or Portrait of Artist as a Maturing Woman." She writes:

[Eve] goes through the test of the apple. She is told by He who is called God that she must not eat the apple. She is told that she mustn't, because otherwise she is going to die. And this is a completely opaque message. It does not mean anything for her, since death does not exist in Paradise. This will give birth to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and even to all philosophy. So the message is: 'Don't.' That's all: 'Don't.' And there is the other message, that of the apple, which says: 'Try me, I am beautiful.' There is no reason why she should not try, because the death message is meaningless. So she tries, because she is a woman. That is what the Bible says, and it is probably true.

I think it is true that her decision must have been determined by something 'feminine' in her structure, particularly her desire and her non-fear of knowing what is inside. So knowledge started for all of us with knowing with the mouth, by tasting. Taste is the first act of knowledge, for women and for all men who are

women. And the price of it has been exile, death, but also work, art, creation.

(Cixous, "Reaching the Point" 2-3)

Cixous' analysis of the Creation story illuminates some of the key ways in which gender roles have been rewritten in order to accommodate a male desire to participate in the creative process. I will focus, however, on the ways in which her narration reinforces the feminine impulse towards creation and masculine impulse towards destruction.

The male God assumes the creative role of generating all of these rules, which Eve must follow, as the threat of being destroyed. According to Cixous, Eve defies God's will for two reasons: first, she logically understands that the threat of destruction cannot be carried out in a perfect Paradise; and second, she wants to expand her knowledge base and dominion, thus creating a new body of knowledge influenced by the addition of one more fact. This act reflects fearlessness before the unknown given the security of salvation. God's threat of death and destruction, the only thing He could wield against her, becomes powerless in the face of her desire to gain more knowledge. The two sets of motivation and authority stand in stark contrast to one another, and are only reinforced by the biological realities that underlie them.

Women, as beings biologically capable of reproducing, are sources of life and freshness in a way that males can never physically achieve; they carry the child for nine months, and once the child exits the womb, mothers have archetypically been the parent that teaches them how to behave. Western culture has also often conceived of nature as a "mother," for its cyclicity, and provision of life sustaining food. Thus, as the feminine opposite, masculine cultural agency has traditionally been defined in converse terms as destructive. Greek mythology, for example, is laden with numerous and prominent

instances of rape by male gods. The story of “Leda and the Swan” in which, Zeus, disguised as a swan, rapes Leda, the mother of Helen of Troy, is emblematic of this type of masculine violence. William Butler Yeats famously narrated this story in a poem from his 1928 collection “The Tower”:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
 And how can body, laid out in that white rush,  
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.  
 Being so caught up,  
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (Yeats 247)

Much like Wilfred Owen, Yeats employs vivid physical sensory imagery to describe the rape, but takes it one step further. This intensely physical encounter is framed in terms of a victory for the swan; he is termed “feathered glory” and the lines that describe the actual penetration are articulated as a metaphor for breaking down enemy walls in war. Thus, this desecration of Leda’s body is equated with success and glory. This story is a celebration of Zeus, ruler of the gods and world, exercising his dominion over the female body. The poem closes with an articulation of the seemingly disposable nature of Leda’s body after it has been used for sexual ends. In this rape story, among the others that make up Western cultural and literary history, males wield violence, cruelty, and confinement as means to power, especially over female bodies. This type of violence is



most commonly associated with male agency. In these tales, and for a theorist like Cixous, there is no male agency without some form of subjective violence.

In constructing a workable definition of violence for analyzing Millay's work, I borrow from several classic theorists and philosophers of violence: among them Slavoj Zizek, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault. These theorists represent several eras of conceptualizing violence, and have varied historical contexts as their frames of reference. Remarkably, they overlap in their classification of violence as a consequence of a threat of power and as a force capable of transforming the psychology of both individuals and society. The most recent of the three, Slavoj Zizek, published his book, Violence: Six Sideways Reflections in 2008, in which he categorized violence in two realms: subjective and objective. He explains:

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of background, which generates such outbursts. [...] Subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence. First, there is a 'symbolic' violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call 'our house of being.' As we shall see later, this violence is not only at work in the obvious – and extensively studied- cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of

meaning. Second, there is what I call ‘systemic’ violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. (Zizek 2)

Here, Zizek articulates the notion that not every kind of violence is the explicit violence of war. More complex, however, is his notion that subjective violence has a clear actor, while objective violence is implicit in the systems that organize and order our society. Although Millay has some poems that recognize the subjective, oft-romanticized violence, it is the latter that Millay’s entire poetic project engages: the violence that regulates the behavior of entire populations of people, forcing them to submit to prescribed cultural norms. She must be understood as having this modernist sensibility, this will to revise the dysfunctional structures of her time, or at the very least, to recognize and question their disciplining functions. She calls attention to the feminine trope of shaping identity in order to help her reader understand the ways that cultural institutions shape our identities. Subjective violence, which is essentially brute masculine violence, is inadequate for articulating this truth because it does not, for Millay, have the same magnitude or long-term impact as objective violence.

I will draw upon objective violence in my conceptualization of “gentle violence,” in the sense that its coercive power relies on the influence of words and language, rather than on the influence of physical dominance and weapons, more prevalent in the time in which she was writing. Zizek’s “objective violence” is the mode in which Millay both revels and suffers because she is confronted with absorbing both modes of violence, and claiming and shaping the objective violence as feminine, in the historical contexts of the Great War and Modernism. She revels in this violence because, in some sense, and as we

will see in the close readings, she becomes it, in order to shock her audience into feeling. She suffers in it, because, in reality, she is subject to its disciplining force. Her critics rebuke her as being sentimental and “popular” because she is a woman.

In considering objective violence as gentle violence, it is important to understand the way that this violence works on the level of poetic language. Working through this theorization of violence through poetry has significant ramifications because poetry relies upon far fewer words to convey a message. Millay recognizes the limitations of language to adequately articulate the consequences of systemic violence. Her poetic project also seeks to point to the daily perennial confinement of language, and the ways in which language itself prevents an adequate articulation of complete emotion. The specificity with which she selects literary devices – from symbols, to enjambment, to metaphors, to alliteration – all work in conjunction with the language itself towards defying the confinement and shortcomings of language, and providing a more comprehensive description of the effects of this kind of violence.

Prior to Zizek, Hannah Arendt theorized on violence in a related way. Born into a secular Jewish family in Germany in 1906, and spending her early years in Königsberg, East Prussia, she devoured the works of Kant and Kierkegaard as an adolescent (Villa 22). Her university studies

coincided with what were, relatively speaking, the most stable years of the Weimar Republic. She and other ‘resolute starvings’ [...] were free to pursue their philosophical vocation without the question of politics – or, more to the point, anti-Semitism – subsuming everything. [...] For Arendt, the implications of the Nazi ascendance in 1931-1932 and eventual coming to power in 1933 were all

too clear [...] There can be little doubt that both her Jewishness and her statelessness had a profound impact on Arendt's subsequent political thinking.

(Villa 22-4)

The political instability and violent repression that punctuated much of her adult life shaped her conception of violence, as she articulates it in her book, *On Violence*. Per Žižek's consciousness, Arendt's reality was that of subjective violence being propped up by the rhetoric and institution of objective violence. The ideology and language of Nazism justified the genocide and torture of the Jews, and a dangerous, sinister cycle pervaded. She claims: [violence]

is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used to the purpose of multiplying natural strength. [...] Moreover, nothing as we shall see, is more common than the combination of violence and power. (Arendt, *On Violence* 46-47)

Her opening notion of the instrumental nature of violence is one on which Millay expands, revising it slightly from instrumental to productive. Her associations of violence to strength and power indicate the close relationships of all of these ideas with traditional conceptions of masculinity. Arendt continues, "Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost" (Arendt, *On Violence* 53). In other words, in the face of a threat, and as exemplified in global politics in the twentieth century, "sheer violence" (to which Žižek refers as subjective violence) and destruction are the strategies commonly proposed by masculine cultural agency. Arendt's criticism of her patriarchal

world emerges here with great dynamism: men seek to destroy that which they cannot control.

Finally, Michel Foucault's theorization of *The Carceral* is of interest in its indication of a melding of prison logic into other institutions, resulting in parallel underlying architectures for the medical hospital, the army barracks, and the prison. In addition, these institutions have a parallel cultural function of creating safe, stable subjects who have internalized the ideals of surveillance and self-care. Millay's poetic project promotes an understanding of this institutional, disciplining violence as having an essentially feminine agency; of playing a forcefully nurturing role, which perpetuates objective violence in its restriction of the identities of those whom they are meant to organize.

In his 1975 work, Discipline and Punish, Foucault outlines the conditions at Mettray Penal Colony, the first youth prison to exist in France, in order to analyze the effects of prison violence. This prison was an all boys prison without walls whose disciplining depended largely upon the farmland on which the prison was situated. It was conceived of and founded by Frederic-Auguste Demetz and Bretignieres de Courteilles. Demetz believed that the most important feature of the institution was "to train men and turn them from evil to good is a charge not to be entrusted to the first assistants who may offer themselves. This important ministry requires disciplined minds, sincere self-devotion, and morals above suspicion" ("Mettray: from 1839-1856," 6). In other words, the founder of this innovative correctional structure maintained that the former specific qualities were necessary to discipline the minds of young boys. It is in the context of this institution that Foucault decides to craft his theories on prison violence. He writes:

Why Mettray? Because it is the disciplinary form at its most extreme, the model in which are concentrated all the coercive technologies of behavior. In it were to be found ‘cloister, prison, school, regiment.’ The small highly hierarchized groups, into which the inmates were divided, followed simultaneously five models. (Lawrence 234)

These were: the family, the army, the workshop, the school, and the judicial model (Lawrence 234). The variety of institutions from which Mettray adapts its organizational hierarchies indicate both the places in which society typically conditions its citizens to act “normal,” and that these “typical” disciplining institutions share basic underlying similarities in the ways in which they organize power. Specifically, these power structures are preserved through punishment. Foucault notes:

the least act of disobedience is punished and the best way of avoiding serious offenses is to punish the most minor offences severely: at Mettray, a useless word is ‘punishable’; the principal punishment inflicted was confinement to one’s cell; for isolation is the best means of acting on the moral nature of children; it is there above all that the voice of religion, even if it has never spoken to their hearts, recovers all its emotional power’; the entire parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell on the walls of which are written in black letters: ‘God sees you.’ (Lawrence 234-5)

Thus, Mettray employed a practical and effective combination of external and internal violence in order to “normalize” its patients/prisoners.

The muddy line between patient and prisoner must also be considered because it begs us to distinguish between a hospital and an asylum and the respective reasons for

which an individual is sent to each. An individual is sent to a hospital to seek help for a physical ailment. An individual is sent to an asylum to seek help for a mental ailment. The asylum patient is often seen as a threat to society for their mental health issues and may also be blamed for their inadequacies. But who sets the standards for “normalcy”? The answer is that knowledge is created and controlled by the very institutions which Mettray based its own hierarchical structure. An inability or unwillingness to submit to this hierarchy is perceived as dangerous and in need of reform. However, in the case of an asylum, there is still the understanding that the individual is only partially responsible for their inadequacies because their abnormalities are not necessarily in their control. Thus, we have the prison, for those who willfully disregard societal norms and behavioral guidelines. These individuals are deemed able to comply with societal expectations, but merely choose not to do so. It is in these cases that punishment and violence are most commonly justified.

Foucault discusses the particular responsibilities of those who perform disciplinary function at Mettray, an institution who seems to fall between an asylum and a prison, and whose prisoners/patients were at a formative stage of their lives. These “chiefs and deputies” were ordinary people, who, at their jobs, were expected to be “technicians of behavior: engineers of conduct, orthopedists of individuality” (“Mettray: From 1839 to 1856,” 235). Essentially, their role was to decide which pieces of the prisoners’ identities were acceptable, and which needed to be punished and removed. They “had to be not exactly judges, or teachers, or foremen, or noncommissioned officers, or ‘parents,’ but something of all of these things in a quite specific mode of intervention” (“Mettray: From 1839 to 1856,” 235). The wide range of professions from

which the “chief” borrows traits is troubling, albeit illuminating; it shows the reach of this systemic violence challenged by Millay and how this disciplining mode of power informs hierarchies in all societal institutions.

In sum, these theorists provide useful conceptualizations of violence for understanding Millay’s poetic project. Cixous articulates the Western male writer’s impulse to rewrite gender roles in order to accommodate the male desire to participate in the creative process. This helps us to recognize Millay’s poetic project, in part, as one that seeks to unveil this impulse as a hoax. Cixous also sheds light upon the concept of woman as creative and productive, a notion that champions Millay’s work and life. In terms of violence theory, Zizek’s dichotomy of objective and subjective violence appears hierarchically in Millay’s work, which privileges the power of objective violence for its gentleness and cunning. Foucault’s explanation of institutions, a form of this objective, specifically systemic, violence, and his suggestion that prison logic pervades in other institutions, support Millay’s idea that these institutions ultimately serve to divorce individuals from their own identities. Thus, individuals are emotionally productive when they process this affront internally, and are forced to strengthen their instinct of self-preservation. The combination of these thinkers’ ideas allow an interested reader to discover a refreshing new layer to Millay’s work and a new mode of understanding her poetic project.

#### ROAD MAP

My investigation will consist of several close readings, guided by Cixous’ gender theory, and Arendt, Foucault, and Zizek’s violence theories explained above. The following section exemplifies why this is a productive and necessary approach to Millay’s poetry.



In one of her lesser-known poems, “The Prisoner,” Millay articulates the challenges she faces in striving to produce a uniquely feminine violence. Although, on the surface, these lines appear to speak only to feminine gender role expectations, upon closer examination, we see a fascinating commentary and distinction made between two types of violence: one which locks her in, and one which locks her out. It reads:

All right, Go ahead!  
 What’s in a name?  
 I guess I’ll be locked into  
 As much as I’m locked out of! (Millay, *Collected Poems* 127)

The title, in particular, plays a crucial role in clarifying the form of violence in this poem; the prisoner’s identity is being erased. This act itself is mostly subjective violence in the sense that there is a clearly identifiable agent that is responsible for stripping her of her identity. However, this phenomenon is merely a product of a culture-defining process, a result of the proper functioning of the prison system, which is intended to force the outliers of society into conformity. In this sense, it is an example of Žižek’s objective violence.

The tone of these four lines appears to be equally as resolute as it is resigned. For the purpose of my close reading I will use feminine pronouns to refer to the narrator, as I will argue for both a gendered and a violence themed reading of the lines. The first two lines indicate that the prisoner is giving permission to her jailer to erase her identity and assign her a prisoner number. In some way, her authorization of the annexation of her name is a ploy at regaining dignity; It isn’t being taken from her, she is allowing it to be taken from her. At the very least, it reflects an understanding of the prison process. Her jailer is not controlling the prisoner through fear of the unknown, but rather, through this process. What will become unknown as the result of the process is the prisoner’s

identity. The denial of her own name, “locks her out” of her identity, while her status as a prisoner “locks her into” her jail cell. The notion of prisoners being locked into certain modes of behavior and thinking, as they are locked out of society, is one that Michel Foucault analyzes at length in a manner that is useful for understanding this poem.

Finally, the two closing lines indicate that the prisoner’s initial assumption was to be locked out of something. The syntax of the last two lines, with “I guess” preceding the “I’ll be locked into” and “as much as” preceding the “locked out of” reflect a more recent realization of the former than the latter. As such, the locked into seems to be more closely tied to the loss of her name and identity. In other words, in losing her “uniqueness,” she is condemned to a life of monotony, and rigid expectations that she will fit a particular mold of confinement. This theme of confinement, which also emerges in “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines,” is a mode of psychological violence, in which the individual is forced to sacrifice a piece of their identity; This act is strenuous, unnatural and compulsory, and thus, violent. In terms of the modernist historical context of this poem, it is a particularly apt response by Millay to her critics who have sought over several decades to pigeonhole her into one confined identity, and lock her out of their circles, rather than acknowledge the rich complexity of her work. She articulates both how she is being subjected and the ultimate purpose of her rejection.

From a feminine perspective, the poem speaks to the ways in which women were locked into specific expectations of remaining within the domestic sphere, while simultaneously being locked out of intellectual conversations and occupations. In 1928, eight years after Millay’s poem is published, this idea about the restrictive nature of identity resurfaces in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own: “I thought of the organ

booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (Woolf 24). The locked out aspect of this violence can be rationalized through Hannah Arendt’s conception of violence as a reaction to fear of losing power. In barring women from engaging in their realm, men sought to maintain hegemony over these intellectual discourses. This is why, when faced with someone as dominating as Millay, the response was to lock her into a gender stereotype of sentimentalism, in order to lock her out of the masculine stereotype of complex thought.

On a basic level, we can understand “The Prisoner” as a bridge between the two pillars of my analysis. Given the obviously dualistic nature of my analysis, I have structured my project in two chapters: the first on external violence, and the second on internal violence. I define external violence as outwardly directed violence. That is, violence that is inflicted toward another or from the outside. This chapter will allow for an analysis of the interaction between two agents in a violent interaction. I will contextualize modernism at the beginning of the chapter to foster an understanding about why this kind of violence is significant to Millay’s poetic project in specific ways that vary from how it bears on the poetic projects of her contemporaries. Chapter two, on internal violence, will explore a sampling of Millay’s poetry that works through the complexities of violence towards the self. This chapter is just as much about resistance and it is about self-destruction, for it is in the inevitable struggle between these two within a single individual that Millay’s work sees value. The conclusion will include a close reading of her poem “The Suicide,” a type of violence whose effects manifest internally and externally. Each of these sections seeks to reinforce that Millay’s often

oversimplified image as an exclusively romantic, feminist, or otherwise rebellious poet does not account for the complexity that belies her criticism of institutional violence as violence that seeks to alienate the individual from itself by squashing notions of self-worth and self-preservation. Thus, Millay becomes an artisan of violent feminine agency: a gentle violence that pervades both internal and external violence.

## CHAPTER 1: EXTERNAL VIOLENCE

### REWRITING WESTERN CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Millay is predominantly interested in the psychological effects of outwardly directed violence. That is external violence that intends to manipulate and influence the psyche of its victims. This violence is softer, quieter, and gentler than subjective violence: often affecting its subjects in an undetectable manner. Millay's writing engages with institutions that do this on a macrocosmic level and on interactions among individuals that do this on a microcosmic level. For her poetic project, this violence culturally manifests itself in a literary sense across genre and form, as much as it does content. She works her way through appropriating and revising biblical text, Greek mythology, the fairytale, the nursery rhyme, and the sonnet, in order to, through her subversion, make apparent the hegemony of these institutions and how that hegemony, in its gentleness and disciplinary action, assumes a feminine character. Her project proposes a new understanding of rule: a new order, in which violence is not reactive, as it is with male cultural agency, but rather proactive, and thus becomes a defining feature of her version of a feminine cultural agency. Thus, in this chapter I will argue that Millay's understanding of systemic violence as "gentle" proposes a pathway to power that seeks to instruct, rather than to destroy, to nurture in a prescribed way, rather than to raze altogether.

To this end, I will contextualize her work in the cultural movement of modernism in which it emerged, in order to clarify how, despite her tactical diversion from her contemporaries, her poetic project exudes an equally potent and enlightened skepticism of the intentions of institutions and ideologies of the time. This context will be the backdrop to my close readings of “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines,” “A visit to the Asylum,” and “Bluebeard,” a small sampling of poems which most clearly reflect Millay’s understanding of outwardly directed violence in the context of institutions.

#### NOT JUST YOUR AVERAGE MODERNIST

Despite the various discrepancies in popular understandings of modernism, it is widely accepted that: “At the heart of modernist aesthetic lay the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had either been destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies” (Norton 932). Millay’s life and poetic project are nothing if not flagrant challenges of this kind to the status quo. At the very least, on the thematic level, her poetry complicates societal assumptions about gender roles, sex, and romance. I propose that at the formal level, and although most people understand her impulse towards form as being quintessentially “unmodern,” she uses these forms in a subversive way in order to show the power of institutions.

In part, we can understand Millay’s project as one that employs the function of both form and theme to articulate violent realities. To this end, her most noteworthy, although not exclusive, formal fixation is with the sonnet, for its dually instrumental and coherent nature. Thematically, she is commonly understood as a lyric poet, a love poet, a feminist poet, but the originality of her writing is its preoccupation with violence as a

means to meaning; as a phenomenon where we must face our human condition as one resistant to order, and violence as a productive form for this resistance. Simultaneously, Millay understands violence as a productive form for imposing order, as capable of isolating an individual from their order-resistant identity, so that they submit to conventional social structures. It is objective violence, the violence that imposes order through institution and language that Millay's poetic project frames as having a feminine character.

By embracing violence, Millay seizes these traditional modes of power and revises them in a way that is different from her modernist contemporaries. Her project then, when placed in a framework of violence, becomes more complicated than her image is usually afforded; she forces preexistent structures into being productive for her in order to assert her mastery over them as a writer working through a distinctly female point of view. This process results in a new feminine mode of expression, in which psychological control is a legitimate means to authority over shaping identity. From a young age, Millay's mother exemplified a resistance to institutions, which Millay would adopt herself. Cora Lounella kicked her husband out because of his gambling habit, leaving her with little choice but to leave town to find a job that would make ends meet (Milford 28). The Millay sisters grew up independently, with a deep love of reading and sense of respect for themselves. They often submitted poetry and writing to literary magazines and won several prizes (Milford 35). She had a deep personal understanding of the shortcomings of institutions in her society, accompanied with a deep understanding of how to operate (and thrive) outside of these expectations. Millay was the third woman to

earn the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923, as well as a recipient of the Robert Frost Medal for Poetry (Griffith 463).

Her revisions to society's institutional violence and authority result in gentle violence, soft cruelty, and public confinement, the immutable voices, which meaningfully and refreshingly unlock the feminist lexicon in her sonnets, too often oversimplified and misunderstood by critics. In fact, the Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry notes:

Not only has the importance of women modernists often been overlooked by male poets and critics, but it was at times deliberately suppressed by male writers who were threatened by the entry of women into the world of literary high culture.

When women poets made a concerted attempt to compete in the literary marketplace, they risked being dismissed as 'poetesses' or 'sweet singers' rather than treated as serious artists. (Beach 72)

Presenting this analysis in an anthology on modernism cements the widespread acceptance of the notion of male modernist poet's insecurity with regards to women poets. Thus, the motivation behind violence, as expressed by Arendt, was exemplified in Millay's historical context.

One such male modernist is Ezra Pound, whose poem "Sestina Altaforte" articulates a mode of subjective violence in which women surely could not participate:

Loquitor: En Bertran de Born  
     Dante Alighieri put this man in hell for that he was a stirrer-up of strife.  
     Eccovi!  
     Judge ye!  
     Have I dug him up again?  
 The scene is at his castle, Altaforte. "Papiolis" is his jongleur.  
 "The Leopard," the device of Richard (Coeur de Lion).



## I

Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.  
 You whoreson dog, Papiolis, come! Let's to music!  
 I have no life save when swords clash.  
 But, ah! when I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing  
 And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,  
 Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing.

## II

In hot summer have I great rejoicing  
 When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace,  
 And the light'nings from black heav'n flash crimson,  
 And the fierce thunders roar me their music  
 And the winds shriek through the clouds man, opposing,  
 And through all the riven skies God's swords clash.

## III

Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!  
 And the shrill neighs of destriers in battle rejoicing,  
 Spiked breast to spiked breast opposing!  
 Better one hour's stour than a year's peace  
 With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!  
 Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!

## IV

And I love to see the sun rise blood-crimson.  
 And I watch his spears through the dark clash  
 And it fills all my heart with rejoicing  
 And pries wide my mouth with fast music  
 When I see him so scorn and defy peace,  
 His lone might 'gainst all darkness opposing.

## V

The man who fears war and squats opposing  
 My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson  
 But is fit only to rot in womanish peace  
 Far from where worth's won and the swords clash  
 For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;  
 Yea, I will all the air with my music.

## VI

Papiols, Papiols, to the music!  
 There's no sound like to swords swords opposing,  
 No cry like the battle's rejoicing  
 When our elbows and swords drop the crimson  
 And our charges 'gainst "The Leopard's" rush clash.

May God damn for every all who cry "Peace!"

VII

And let the music of the swords make them crimson!

Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!

Hell blot black for always the thought "Peace"! (Pound 108)

Pounds employs the sestina: "a poem of six six-line stanzas in which the end words in the lines of the first stanza are repeated, in a set order of variation, as the end word of the stanzas that follow. The sestina concludes with a three-line envoy which incorporates, in the middle and end of the lines, all six of these end words" (Abrams 378). The prescriptive, formulaic nature of this traditional form requires immense skill and calculation, like strategy of war. However, it is not this dexterity of battle that Pounds is concerned with, but rather the hysterical blood-thirst. Repetition works at a number of levels, from mirroring the march of soldiers to the repeated engraining of violent ideology. Killing is equated with victory and music, the narrator "[has] no life save when swords are clashing."

This form embodies the systemic violence of ideology and how it is engrained, but the content and theme are purely subjective violence. The language of attack is that of physical strength and turmoil: "tempests kill the earth's foul peace," "spiked breast to spiked breast opposing!," and "spear through the dark clash." The metaphors emphasize the shocking character of subjective violence: "light'nings from black heav'n flash crimson, / And the fierce thunders roar me their music."

Although this is not necessarily a form commonly used by Pound, it is important to note that not every modernist rejected traditional forms indiscriminately. But Millay, unlike Pound, does not stop her commentary on objective violence at form. Rather, she uses theme and imagery to this end too. On the other hand, Pound appeals to the

subjective violence of war for its shock value and intoxicating nature. Thus, although their underlying intents are to provoke thought and skepticism about ideology, Pound approaches it by narrating subjective violence of war, while Millay's approach focuses on the intentions and functions of institution. She seeks to draw attention and expose the gentle violence of society.

#### VIOLENCE OF FAMILIARITY IN THE SONNET, FAIRYTALE, AND MYTH

In this section, I undertake to close read a handful of her poems, which exemplify her theme of the destructive nature of external violence. These poems are just a small sampling of a wide body of work intended to communicate this mode of power, but it is worth noting that the genres of these poems are all extremely accessible in their familiarity: the sonnet, the fairytale, and the myth. This accessibility can be attributed, in part, to these genres' distinct, inextricable role in shaping Western civilization.

First, numerous iconic writers have employed the sonnet over the course of several centuries as a form of resolution. Thus, sonnet writing demands the articulation of complicated, often elusive, problems. It has been employed to articulate problems of love, problems of nature, problems of society, problems of mourning, among countless others. Millay's often-anthologized poem, published post-humously in 1954 after decades of global conflict, "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines" is a meta-comment on the nature of the sonnet itself. Although this sonnet is often read and criticized for its overtly feminist message, the decidedly sinister nature of this sonnet reveals the psychological dimension of Millay's gentle violence, when read in the context of violence in her poetry. She uses order, subjugation, and reform to construct an image of gentle violence, which results in "making [the subject of her violence] good." An

extended close reading of this sonnet, allows us to understand how Millay employs violence to alienate “Chaos” from its own natural identity. The tactics that take place at Mettray, analyzed by Foucault in his discussion of *The Carceral*, come alive here to show the ways in which institutions “normalize” people. The narrator’s obsession with reforming Chaos follows from a societal impulse for uprooting outliers, and assimilating them to “make them good.”

I will put Chaos into fourteen lines  
 And keep him there; and let him thence escape  
 If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape  
 Flood, fire, and demon --- his adroit designs  
 Will strain to nothing in the strict confines  
 Of this sweet order, where, in pious rape,  
 I hold his essence and amorphous shape,  
 Till he with Order mingles and combines.  
 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. (Millay, *Collected Poems* 728)

In terms of both theme and form, Millay seizes power, revealing her plan to force Chaos into submission. This determination to confine something conceptually outside the limits of confinement draws out in her a proactively violent poetic voice, right from the opening lines: “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines/ and keep him there.” She is assuming control over this force, which she personifies as masculine, holding him in the prison of the sonnet form, without regard to his own will. The form becomes a kind of confinement; a conditioning force within which she wields ultimate authority. Her confidence and authority are unshakeable; she is the master of both the sonnet form, adopting it to make room for Chaos, and of Chaos, forcing it to fit within the confines of her fourteen lines.

She continues: “let him twist, and ape / Flood, fire, and demon.” The word choice in this section indicates cruelty. One can picture a helpless little boy wriggling in his attempts to resist the order that she is imposing on him. Perhaps oddly on the surface, but undeniably calculatedly, these lines are packed with Biblical allusions. She assumes the omnipotence of God, and quite specifically, the feared God of the Old Testament. This is the God of retribution and punishment, the God of masculine patriarchy. In assuming this role, and maintaining her own feminine poetic voice, she penetrates this archetypically masculine identity and claims it as her own. She recreates the very opening lines of Genesis and makes Chaos out of order. In doing so, she is rewriting Western myth, a task for which the sonnet is the ideal literary form because of its perennial role in Western literary tradition. In appropriating this form, she presents and defies the gendered connotations of creation, destruction, and resolution, seeking to identify the role of violence in each of these actions.

For example, “Ape” evokes a certain kind of primitive, animalistic violence. It also denotes mimicry. Millay exposes the ways in which Chaos merely mimics apocalypse. It is not a creative force; it destroys indiscriminately, irrationally. At the very least, Chaos is irrationality: the opposite of form. The line continues: “Flood,” a reference to Noah’s arc, and the total destruction of the Earth. “Demon” and “fire” are the language of the prophets that warned of God’s anger toward the people. Fire is also a scriptural reference from Genesis 9:11, reading: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again with all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (*The New Interpreter’s Bible* 397). The Covenant is reiterated again in 2 Peter 3:6-7: “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and

destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

Her play on this verse indicates her intention of rewriting Western literary tradition, starting at its very center. She is subjecting Chaos to the same violence that God reined upon the Earth during this age, but also engaging in a covenant. God promises to never flood the Earth again. He will do something different, something “creative.” She assumes the role that God assumes in using the flood as a teachable moment. In using her violence to improve Chaos, she uses this “primitive” manifestation of emotion in a productive way. Given this, she creates a forum for violence to have “designs,” as Arendt and Zizek propose. In other words, she conceives of a violence that has productive ends, ends which she neatly sums up in the final line on the sonnet: “I will only make him good.”

For Millay, “good” is a matter of identity. It is a totalizing quality and the exact antithesis of Chaos. It is what mothers seek for their children. Good is “correct;” good complies with the norm. It is both the term for abiding by the rules, and the consequence of living within the confines of objective violence. Good is virtue. Literary critics, such as Holly Peppe, have suggested that Millay’s poetic project undertakes a rewriting to feminine virtue: “Millay, of course, moved far beyond the prescribed boundaries of the lyric genre and took unprecedented risks with her subject matter by favoring women’s sexuality as a theme. In doing so she was redefining the culturally accepted idea of ‘feminine virtue’ – an accomplishment that encouraged other women to reevaluate the limitations placed on their lives by heritage and their society” (Griffith 470). In other words, feminine virtue, rather than manifesting merely in consolation, affection, and

patience, manifests here as a powerful action of confining something greater than itself, in order to radically change its identity. Virtue as power is no longer understood as a gendered trait; it is accessible to both genders.

These closing lines confirm her belief that, paradoxically, through violence, Chaos can be estranged from itself, and transformed into “good.” The undeniably sinister closing of this poem implies an act of psychological reform of her prisoner. She will not merely force him to perform certain actions, but to reform all of his actions to fit a mold, an archetype of being “good.” She will confine her prisoner, in the same way that we will see in the next poem, to operate within certain norms and boundaries; in this case those prescribed by the sonnet form. This is the violence that Foucault discusses, the violence generated from within as a result of pressures and abuse from the outside. If a prisoner knows what their jailer is capable of, and they always think their jailer is watching, they will always act within those limitations in order to avoid punishment. At a certain point, the prisoner comes to internalize these behavioral patterns, so that they become second nature.

Thus, rather than employ modes of subjective violence that might, in their public scale or magnitude, evoke a one-time visceral reaction, Millay’s violence is quiet, calculated, and acute; making use of the intimacy of a one-on-one attack, providing the same sickening fulfillment for the perpetrator as his victim pleads for mercy. It is disciplinary. This gentle violence stands in stark contrast to the violence wielded by a natural disaster or other more public manifestations of violence, which evoke loud outpourings of grief and distress. Rather, Millay’s violence reaches the very private core of her victim.

This tension manifests itself in the series of pseudo binaries that she sets up in the lines that follow: “in the strict confines / Of this sweet order, where, in pious rape, / I hold his essence and amorphous shape, / Till he with Order mingles and combines.” Specifically, she leaves us to ponder the problematic relationships between “strict confines” and “sweet order;” “pious” and “rape;” “essence and amorphous shape;” and “mingles and combines.” In order to strengthen the reader’s association between the first two phrases, Millay uses alliteration. In this way, “strict” and “sweet,” two somewhat conflicting notions come together to associate “confines” and “order.” The subtlety of this strategy echoes the subtlety of the private violence generated in this sonnet. The pairing that follows, of “pious” and “rape,” is significantly more jarring for the reader and this is Millay’s intention. Her constant twists and turns enhance the violence of the reading experience, expanding it beyond mere content, as we are thrust from subtle to explicit. We can also understand this paradox of “pious rape” as a productive metaphor for understanding her penetration of the “sacred” Petrarchan sonnet form, attaining and confining the unattainable Chaos. Thus, she also profanes the notion of the Petrarchan woman; this relationship is one of domination, rather than longing; of power lust, rather than romantic idealization. In contrast to the conventional Petrarchan sonnet, in which there are barriers and distance between the lovers, Millay employs the form to narrate an intimate physical and psychological interaction between Chaos and Order.

But piety also takes on a new dimension: breeching the devoutly religious into her devout determination to confine Chaos. To this end, and in service of her creation of a world of private violence, she pairs this dimension with rape. Rape is an explicitly sexual and gendered act of violence committed to exert dominance, and has been a literary



symbol of masculine power play since its appearance in dozens of Greek myths. Two obvious examples of rape as assertions of masculinity come to mind: the first being Achilles rape of Deidamia in Statius' *Achilleid* in order to "prove his manhood," and the second being Zeus' rape of Callisto, while disguised as Diana, in which his kisses were described as "not maidenly" in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In both of these instances, rape affirms the masculinity, and the masculine connotations of this type of violence.

In employing this kind of violence, she claims it for women too. Her feminine voice plays a unique role here, as women are more often the victims, rather than the perpetrators of this kind of violence. Thus, we can understand her appropriation of this masculine mode of subjective power as a subversion of the institution of rape as a whole; a tactic of permeating the patriarchal expectation that this violent act should be reserved only for men. In this sonnet, rape becomes an accessible violence for both genders, making her ploy one of subversion of the existing power structure. This impulse is consistent with feminism, which Faith summarizes as follows:

Feminism is both a spontaneous reaction against and a strategic resistance to existing power relations. The project is not to overturn one system of dominance for another, but rather to deconstruct power relations by transforming or reconstructing social values and institutions. The feminist movement serves to refract and highlight significant features of power relations, and to expose how hierarchies, built on divisions created according to discursive categories of difference, have destructive effects on the dominant as well as on the subordinated. (Faith 47)

Ultimately, she does not regard this type of physical sexual violence as the most effective way of “disciplining.” Rather, it is in “making [him] good” that she commits the ultimate violent act. Her appropriation of rape is not to claim rape as a feminine violence, but rather to reflect a feminine capacity of employing this type of violence, and choosing something more powerful.

With the declaration that follows this section: “I hold his essence and amorphous shape,” she attempts to articulate the elusive nature of Chaos. It is tangible (she can hold it), but although it is very specific in nature (essence), it can’t be confined to a shape (it’s amorphous). This is the core of subjective violence; it rattles the inner notions of stability, it evokes a visceral reaction because it breaches understanding. Her final pairing of “mingles” and “combines,” also unites two seemingly similar notions in order to create friction. Mingling assumes contact while maintaining separation, while combining carries an element of absorption. Additionally, these two concepts carry erotic undertones and indicate the ways in which humans encounter each other sexually and reproduce. Although perhaps less obviously violent than the previous pairings, she still generates an element of conflict that cannot be denied. This fading makes sense in the context; the struggle is over. Her project of “improving” Chaos by making him “good” is at an end. However, there are countless others like him which must undergo the same process at her hands.

Next, she proceeds to create disharmony in her choppy syntax and change in pronoun use: “Past are the hours, the years of our duress, / His arrogance, our awful servitude: / I have him.” The only grammatically clear and concise part of this sentence is the final piece: “I have him.” She violently disrupts the somewhat scattered listing that

precedes it with this declaration. Moreover, her change from “**our** duress” to “**his** arrogance” and return to “**our** servitude” jars the reader. In the first phrase of these lines, she puns on “hours” as both a unit of time and the plural first person possessive “ours.” She is conveying the rupture in their union and then contextualizing it on a time continuum. Her transition to actually using the pronoun “our” is very deliberate especially considering the noun it is qualifying, denoting a more complex intimacy than has been previously discussed by the poem. She will now inflict duress on him, they will not go through it together. She then jumps to “his” and affirms that, in confining him into fourteen lines, she will strip him of his arrogance. He will have nothing to be conceited about; he will have to submit. Her unexpected return to “our” and reference to an experience of servitude is reminiscent of a prisoner serving time. She ends this sentence with a clear, concise, declarative sentence and reintroduces the pronoun “I,” reminding us of her own agency and control.

Reading her from a Foucauldian perspective, with the understanding that she is taking on the voice of society, these lines are particularly menacing. In proposing strategies for psychologically controlling another human, Foucault asserts the following:

If punishment is to present itself to the mind as soon as one thinks of committing a crime, as immediate a link as possible must be made between the two: a link of resemblance, analogy, proximity. ‘The penalty must be made to conform as closely as possible to the nature of the offence, so that fear of punishment diverts the mind from the road along which the prospect of an advantageous crime was leading it.’ The ideal punishment would be transparent to the crime that it punishes; and for him to contemplate, it will be infallibly the sign of the crime

that it punished; and for him who dreams of the crime too, the idea of the offence will be enough around the sign of punishment. (Lawrence 445)

Millay's preoccupation is with assuming a disciplinarian role. She wants to condition Chaos using subjective violence, such as the rape, so that Chaos associates any resistance to the "system" with being punished. This generates objective violence: Chaos acts in service of the system for fear of the consequences of rebelling against it. Thus, Chaos is alienated from his own identity at the hands of subjective violence, in service of objective violence. Žizek's distinction between objective and subjective violence, illuminates the ways in which her goal, as she articulates it in this sonnet, is to combine the two in order to ultimately condition her victim to act a certain way.

Žizek's subjective violence emerges here as Chaos himself: Chaos is what begets crime, terror and civil unrest, but interestingly Millay positions herself as the "clearly identifiable agent" inflicting violence. In other words, the traditionally subjective violence of Chaos has no power here. It is defenseless before the authority of the narrator's objective violence. Language, order, and implicit expectations triumph over brute force and visible chaos. In other words, there are two levels of violence at stake here. The first being violence on the level of subject and content; and the second being violence on the level of form.

As such, the "instrumentality" of violence, discussed by Arendt, takes on a new dimension in Millay's poetry. It is not only instrumental to her impulse to power, but rather her impulse to power will result in teaching her subjects something. They will come out of her reign "made good." To this end, the sonnet, as a form that offers repetition and resolution becomes the ideal vehicle to communicate these ideas.

Specifically, the repetition of the rhyme scheme dictates the set of possible words that can complete each line. This dimension of repetitive prescription in the sonnet form serves as an apt analogy for the repetitive conditions and prescriptive nature of the choices afforded to prisoners. The resolution at the end shows how convention, society, and form propose to solve problems through prescription. It also reminds us of how Žižek's systemic violence operates on the level of poetic language.

In addition, this sonnet is emblematic of Foucault's notion that discourse produces what it purports to describe because Millay produces a sonnet with an orderly prescriptive structure to describe the process through which she will rectify Chaos. She uses order to invoke order. Consequently, this poem leaves us with the conviction that true violence is order, not disorder. In other words, the most striking kind of violence for Millay is objective, rather than subjective violence, for its intention and capacity to tame disorder. The institution of the asylum hallmarks this type of violence.

The dawn of the asylum saw the implementation of "a new type of supervision – both knowledge and power – over individuals who resisted disciplinary normalization. [...] In the normalization of the power of normalization, in the arrangement of a power knowledge over individuals" asylums perpetuated a sense of security to the rest of society, in their capacity to subdue and reform those who threatened stability ("Mettray: From 1839 to 1856," 237). The hope is that these institutions will be able to create safe and stable subjects who have internalized the ideals of surveillance and self-care. Kerfoot and Knights summarize: that treatment at these facilities consisted of "constraining subjects through external observation, segregation and judgment of populations" in order to produce "a subjectivity that generates its own self-discipline internally, within people.

In other words, the concern with how subjectivity is produced – how individuals come to recognize themselves as subject, [and] in turn, are recognized by others,” are the central functions of an asylum (Kerfoot and Knights 83). Millay’s poetic project sustains that these effects are also carried out by any number of other institutions, and ultimately result in an alienation of the individual from his or her true identity.

In her poem, “A Visit to the Asylum,” Millay uses the A-B-C-B rhyme scheme, typical of nursery rhymes, to narrate the way a child, a member of society at a formative stage of life, experiences an asylum. The point of view is a stark contrast from “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines.” Whereas in “Chaos” the narrator creates objective violence, in “A Visit to the Asylum,” she experiences it. However, her innocence creates a dynamic in which the reader understands more than she does:

Once from a big, big building,  
When I was small, small,  
The queer folk in the windows,  
Would smile at me and call.

And in the hard wee gardens  
Such pleasant men would hoe:  
‘Sir, may we touch the little girl’s hair!’  
It was so red, you know.

They cut me coloured asters  
With shears so sharp and neat,  
They brought me grapes and plums and pears  
And pretty cakes to eat.

And out of all the windows,  
No matter where we went,  
The merriest eyes would follow me  
And make me compliment.

There were a thousand windows,  
All latticed up and down.  
And up to all the windows,  
When we went back to town,

The queer folk put their faces,  
 As gentle as could be;  
 ‘Come again, little girl!’ they called, and I  
 Called back, ‘You come see me!’  
 (Millay, *Collected Poems* 166)

Millay’s choice to narrate this story from the poetic voice of a young girl is deliberate, allowing her to depict the asylum from a naïve perspective. The audience fears for her, expecting that the asylum might overwhelm her. The forces of chaos contained within circulate just under the surface as unacknowledged tension. In other words, the audience understands that there is more to each discussed aspect of her visit, than appears on the surface.

Millay opens the poem as a fairy tale, appropriating the form that has been used throughout the ages to teach children how they should behave; in other words, a form with a disciplining function. The young narrator is in awe of the looming institution and reinforces this by emphasizing the contrast in her own size “small, small” to the size of the building “big, big.” The “thousand windows” are symbolic of the tenement housing that was going up around this time. As readers, we can understand where the child might feel comfortable with the asylum because of her familiarity with this type of building, which, growing up in New York City, she would see everyday. There are echoes of modernization and also of a loss of individuality: the thousands of windows, buildings that can mass house thousands of people, living their lives in extremely close, borderline inhumane conditions. Thus, the window serves as a representation of both Žižek’s objective violence; it is not necessarily visible, but it still confines those within in; and Foucault’s notion that prison logic has flowed into other systemic designs. They serve as

evidence of the former in that, although windows are transparent, they still create a wall. In other words, it might not be an obvious or overt manifestation of violence, but a barrier exists which separate the lives of those within and those outside. In the asylum, the windows serve as a kind of cruel cage for the prisoners to see what they are missing on the outside. This conditions them in a similar way to Foucault's notion of the Panopticon in which the prisoners always believe that their jailers are watching them. They constantly see what is happening outside and internalize patterns of behavior that will help them "rehabilitate," so they can participate in these things once more.

It is also worth noting that the queer folk are gardening. In other words, they are performing a productive service, which requires certain self-control and gentleness: qualities not typically associated with the mentally unstable. They are transforming from chaotic beings, by society's standards, to beings contributing to and subjected by order. She refers to them as "such pleasant men." She does not perceive a threat from them, she accepts their compliments and engages them in conversation. Her attitude towards the prisoners is a product of her limited point of view; she observes objective violence in action without understanding what it is. Millay deliberately chooses this point of view for its allegorical effect; society too is constantly observing objective violence without truly understanding or acknowledging it. This point of view and poetic voice stand in stark contrast to that which we get in "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines," where she has become objective violence and, thus, assumes a greater degree of confidence, and omniscience.

In the lines that follow, in which the patients ask permission to touch the narrator's hair reflect a certain prudence: an engrained knowledge that they must observe



certain social norms, perhaps if they want to ever be released from this prison, or perhaps to avoid punishment. This moment is charged with a suggestion of transgression on behalf of the men that want to touch her hair. The flower and gardening imagery that precede it paired with her identity as a young girl suggest that the men are seeking to “deflower” her. There is something fetishistic about their request, but she can’t recognize it because she is still innocent. This institution, the asylum, serves to protect the innocence of girls like the narrator. A clear synchronization is set up between the disciplining function of the asylum as an institution to rectify the perverse, and the disciplining function of literature, namely fairy tales, to shape children.

The stanza that follows is perhaps the strangest of all. The image of mental patients carrying sharp tools near a small girl is problematic for any reader. Specifically, the mental patients bring her asters. These flowers are longtime emblems of love and patience. These meanings are particularly moving given the patients’ clear fondness for the girl. The notion of patients here takes on a number of connotations, the first being a pun on the word “patient.” Further, it connects with the notion of waiting for her to come back, which appears in the final stanza. They may be unsure of how long they will be kept in this institution. Additionally, in ancient times, it was thought that burning these flowers would protect against evil. In offering her this specific kind of flower, they are distinguishing themselves from the evil. They also offer her fruit: a dually charged symbol of nourishment and the fall of Eve. In terms of the latter, they are tempting her to take from the tree of knowledge; lure her into their clutches by having her break a rule the way they did. However, she only sees the former intentions. These nurturing

instincts of feeding and nourishing are not what we would expect from these insane men. To her, they are competent and loving: safe fairy tale creatures.

This tension creates a psychologically violent reading experience. Much like the outwardly directed violence of the preceding sonnets, the narrator directs the violence towards the reader who realizes that the little girl is in danger the entire time that she is in the asylum. They understand the perverse nature of the prisoners' requests to touch her hair and return to the asylum, and they fear for the safety of the little girl who cannot sense the sinister nature of these men on her own. Simultaneously, the reader hopes that the institution of the prison system will be enough to restrain the prisoners from harming the innocent little girl, whose own experience with institutions is too limited to understand the role of this one. In other words, the reader hopes for the objective violence of this institution to continue functioning smoothly and condition the prisoners to confine their perverse impulses, so that the innocent girl remains safe.

This hope is only magnified in the stanza that follows which the narrator relays how "merriest eyes would follow [her] no matter where [they] went." This idea of constant surveillance alludes to Foucault's prison theory, and the reader get an uneasy feeling that there are two levels of surveillance at work, and that the narrator is now a prisoner, unable to escape the gaze of the insane men. Eerily, the tone is not paranoid; it's joyous. In contrast to our understanding of surveillance as an invasion of privacy, the little girl seems thrilled to be getting so much attention from everyone at the asylum. She doesn't understand the psychological repercussions to these disciplining strategies. As readers, we understand that the prisoners are being reformed through order and that they

can't actually harm her because of the invisible boundaries of the institution that is confining them.

However, in the end, the little girl gets the last laugh. She asks the patients to do something, which we know they will not and cannot. We see the true implications of their conditioning because we know that they are bound to that space and that they will not test the consequences of leaving. Žižek's systemic violence emerges here to demonstrate the tragedy of the smooth operation of this mental health system. The people who have really treated the narrator with what she perceived as sincere warmth are being confined and will not dare to resist this confinement. Again, order triumphs as the chaos bringers and non-conformers of the society are forced to submit to the rules of the asylum. The monotony of their lives is emphasized by the alliteration, repetition, and sing-song-y form, which she employs. This is the world of order, in which there is no room for deviance.

This theme of intolerance and inflexibility with regards to order can also be found in her sonnet, "Bluebeard." Interestingly, this sonnet was written long before the previous two poems and it is the only one from *Renascence* with such a pronounced condemnatory tone. All of the others in the collection are wistful, nostalgic, and mournful; but exude certain determination to shield these vulnerable feelings from her lover. She closes her collection, however, with this accusation and resolves to restore order in her life:

This door you might not open, and you did;  
 So enter now, and see for what slight thing  
 You are betrayed. . . Here is no treasure hid,  
 No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring  
 The sought-for Truth, no heads of women slain  
 For greed like yours, no writhings of distress;

But only what you see...Look yet again:  
 An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.  
 Yet this alone out of my life I kept  
 Unto myself, lest any know me quite;  
 And you did so profane me when you crept  
 Unto the threshold of this room tonight  
 That I must never more behold your face.  
 This now is yours. I seek another place.  
 (Renaissance)

This sonnet is an adaptation of Charles Perrault's French fairytale, "Blue Beard," which Casie Hermansson explains as follows:

at its most elemental, the fairy tale concerns a prohibition and its transgression. [It] feature[s] a secret kept by a male suitor and discovered by his wife or betrothed. The secret is the source of the prohibition, often manifested as a prohibited room. Discovering the secret means death for the woman, and typically the revelation is that the groom has murdered his previous wives or betrothed. Nonetheless, transgression by the final wife enables her to be saved from such death in time. (Hermansson 3-4)

In the context of Millay's poetry, this predecessor is particularly relevant given that the gender roles of the fairy tale are likely reversed, and that the motives for having this separate space are different, in a possible allusion to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Woolf's argument about the distinct disadvantages of women intellectuals and writers, stems from the reality that her female contemporaries had neither time nor space for themselves, to merely think, analyze, and produce literary works. This claim implies that men were at a distinct advantage in this realm because of their access to personal space and time. Woolf writes: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (Woolf 76). She rejects the

notion of prohibition being synonymous with confinement, which Millay proposes in the poem that I explicate next. In addition, by seizing the fairytale form, she meets Woolf's challenge for women to seize their own spaces; Millay will create her own fairytale.

While the theme of prohibition and defiance still play a central role, the ending reflects an independence and resolution that we do not get in the fairy tale, where the final wife must rely on other men for her salvation. Instead, Millay's narrator has the agency and autonomy to remove herself from the situation entirely through her own volition. In this way, she violently resists the person trying to violate her space, by enforcing a consequence for his trespassing. In her fairytale, she chooses to leave the man with the space which he has violated and confidently declares her will to claim a new space for herself.

She opens the sonnet with unconventional syntax, and starts the sentence with the object: "the door." This choice is likely intended to bring the two "you"s in the line closer together and reinforce the acuteness with which she is indicting her trespasser. The choice of "might" is interesting as it puns on the idea of might as strength and force, the kind of violence, which she undermines throughout the poem. In other words, while her violator takes by force, she creates a new order, choosing to claim things for herself rather than take from others. In contrast to her violator, her actions are all to further her ends, rather to infringe on the goals of others. It also underscores the notion that the trespasser made a deliberate choice to open the door by using a verb that signals that the obvious choice in the situation would have been to leave it alone. This choice aspect allows the reader to sympathize with the narrator's quest to hold her violator accountable.

“Might” also rhymes with “slight” in the next line. She uses this association to juxtapose the greatness of his sin and the insignificance of his discovery.

She draws upon a variety of mystical objects that she could possibly have been hiding in that space of hers, reminding us again that she is seizing the fairy tale as a mode of power. In terms of the mystical objects, the “cauldron” and “clear crystal” specifically are used in fairytales as agents of fate: the cauldron to control it, and the crystal to predict it. Millay, in saying that these things are not found in her narrator’s room, is emphasizing her narrator’s own self-sufficiency; she need not rely on magic because she can rely on intellect. Her authority comes from a less superficial place than those of women from fairy tales.

#### CONCLUSION

These three poems, “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines,” “A Visit to the Asylum,” and “Bluebeard,” give us an entry point into what Millay finds significant about external violence. In general, she is drawn to the violence of institutions for their power and authority over the formation of the individual. This fixation and skepticism of institutions marks her as quintessentially modernist, but her approach, which steps back from the subjective violence of war, sets her apart from some of her male modernist contemporaries. At the formal level, her revisions to the sonnet form as well as to the classic Western genres of scripture, the nursery rhyme, and the fairy tale, invite us to question the ways in which their traditions shape our own lives. At the thematic level, these poems all consider institutions from the social conventions of gender norms, to a mental hospital. Arendt’s concept of the instrumentality of violence is productive for detecting the ways in which these forms and themes serve an instructional and

disciplining role in society. Žižek's objective violence serves a similar role, but more specifically, indicates that this violent instrumentality is dangerous because it is engrained in the very assumptions these institutions make about language. The idea of confining Chaos and confining mental patients is what he proposes that language seeks to do with meaning. Foucault's concept *The Carceral* manifests itself in the notion of making Chaos good: the notion that Chaos, under the proper conditioning, can internalize something antithetical to itself and be reformed. In general, it appears on a formal level in that the fairytale and the nursery rhyme, serve disciplining functions in childhood. They are intended to help children internalize "being good." An interested reader might also find these notions working through a psychology of external violence in her other works: "Huntsman, what Quarry?" "The Concert," "Wild Swans," "Autumn Chant," and "Olympian gods, mark now my bedside lamp," among others.

Millay's ultimate concern with this mode of violence, as articulated in these poems and framed by these thinkers, is its fundamental goal of conforming society to one standard at the price of individual identity. For her poetic project, institutions reflect blatant disregard for the individual, and in fact, seek to eliminate the individual's impulse towards self-preservation because it is a threat to the stability of a smooth functioning society.

## CHAPTER 2: INTERNAL VIOLENCE

### ARTICULATIONS OF VIOLENCE WITHIN THE SELF

Millay's preoccupation with internal violence lies in its productive capacity. While external violence, explored in chapter 1, seeks to destroy the capacity of the individual to recognize their unique self-worth by forcing them to conform to one standard of behavior and identification, internal violence calls the individual into a process discovering and defending their unique self-worth. This key difference, for Millay, between external and internal violence manifests for several reasons. External violence, whether one is on the inflicting or receiving end, charges each party with a certain security that is foreign to internal violence. In both of these cases, there are two autonomous beings resistant to each other and this resistance is the product of a clear physical distinction between the two entities. This physical distinction implies two separate beings, each seeking to preserve its sense of self. The aggressor seeks destruction of an external other, while the victim seeks survival. Thus, the impulse to destroy and the impulse to resist exist in two separate physical beings. At the very least, these clear roles offer each party a sense of security, which we can understand as power. This security comes not only from a clear understanding of their own role and the role of the other, but also from knowing there are certain pieces of themselves that the other will never be able to access.



In the absence of this physical separation between opposing agents, as in the case of internal violence, this clarity, security, and power are lost because the individual must take on the role of both destroyer and survivor. This magnifies the intensity of the struggle between self-loathing and self-preservation as they are forced to coexist. For Millay, this intense struggle is productive. The individual is forced to reconcile feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and worthlessness with feelings of value, purpose, and vitality. Therefore, it is not only the former set of emotions, which are on the offensive that are violent, but the mere warfare among the two sets of emotions that creates a violent tension within the individual. Millay's poetic project proposes that this struggle forces the individual into a new kind of self-knowledge; one in which they must not only discover their strengths, but discover that they are capable of using them to survive. In other words, in having to defend themselves to themselves, individuals search for the traits that make them valuable, and assert them as such.

This process is confusing, comprised of trial and error, which might explain Millay's pattern of inconsistency with regards to form and genre. Unlike in chapter one about external violence, where we note that Millay's impulse is to appropriate traditional forms – the sonnet, the fairytale, the myth – internal violence is too complex to be articulated through such accessible, straight forward, and universal modes. Further, with internal violence, one is often too close to be able to identify exactly what they are feeling or how to articulate it, so employing a conventional form would hardly seem appropriate. Instead, she employs a variety of forms and genres in order to echo the variety of sentiments that comprise some of the processes of internal violence: confinement, isolation, rage, and confusion.

In addition, this web of painful emotions and their inherent violence, operates on a different level of cruelty than if they were being wielded by an outside force because the individual can access their own deepest insecurities and use them against his or herself. Unlike in external violence, everything is fair game. Simultaneously, the individual is also able to access their deepest strengths, leaving the individual deadlocked in limbo, from which they cannot fully protect themselves and in which they cannot fully destroy themselves. Millay sees this intense emotional trial as productive to a version of the self that is natural because of the experience of intense emotion and discovery of valuable aspects of the self. The individual ends up keenly aware of both their strengths and their weaknesses and is less susceptible to external violence.

Finally, internal violence often employs strategies commonly used by external oppressors. The victims of internal violence, who are also simultaneously its wielders, are conditioned both to act in a way that conforms to institutional standards and to believe that they are deserving of violent treatment. Millay proposes that, painful as the individual's process might be of proving to him or herself that they are not deserving of violent treatment, it is productive.

#### PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY AND THE BOUNDLESSLY EXTENDING INWARD SELF

Numerous psychoanalysts have studied and articulated this individual survival instinct that is essential to Millay's understanding of internal violence. Famously, in his book, Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud points to the cultural inefficiency of emphasizing the construction of the self as a process that occurs merely from interactions with the external world. Freud notes:

Normally we are sure of nothing so much as a sense of self, of our own ego. This ego appears to us autonomous, uniform and clearly set off against everything else. It was psychoanalytic research that first taught us that this was a delusion, that in fact the ego extends inwards, with no clear boundary... (Freud 4-5)

Freud proposes instead that a fruitful understanding of the self requires a look at the indefinite inward trajectory. His notion that there is a need to understand the way an individual functions within itself is compatible with Millay's belief in the productive nature of internal violence. This is not to say that her poetic project in any way seeks to minimize the influence of external violence or the external world on the individual. Rather, Millay proposes that the fight that takes place within the self to exist naturally despite these unnatural external influences requires closer attention because it is productive. Given that this book was first published in German in 1930, it is unlikely that Millay herself read it or was aware of its theories of psychoanalysis when she was writing her poetry. Its concepts and their echoes in Millay's poetry must be understood as a looming preoccupation of the times.

Freud articulates the specific ways in which these external influences contribute to the experience of suffering:

Suffering threatens us from three sides: from our own body, which, being doomed to decay and dissolution, cannot dispense with pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which can unleash overwhelming, implacable, destructive forces against us; and finally from our relations with others. The suffering that arises from this last source causes us more pain than any other; we

are inclined to regard it as a somewhat superfluous extra, though it is probably no less ineluctable than suffering that originates elsewhere. (Freud 15)

In terms of the final two in particular, the “external world” can be understood as institutions and the “relations with others,” can be understood as personal contact with other individuals. These affronts influence the way we view ourselves and, when internalized, as they are intended to be, produce internal violence. The struggle to reconcile the cruel and disciplining forces of these elements with our notions of our own self worth is productive in that it forces us to find pieces of ourselves worth defending. Once these pieces are found they can be strengthened, creating a stronger sense of self. He expands upon the survival instinct of the individual as “a feeling...of being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself” (Freud 4). In other words, the person seeks not only their own preservation as an individual, but as a part of something bigger than themselves.

Given this understanding of human motivation and existence, it is significant that the majority of the poems with this theme also feature natural symbolism and imagery. Millay’s impulse toward natural imagery makes sense given its apparently inherent stability, cyclicity, and regularity. The internally violent individual yearns for these things, yet they are inaccessible to him or her. Additionally, this use of imagery reflects a need of the individual to compartmentalize these emotions into objects outside of themselves. The internally violent individual seeks to spread out their emotions to alleviate some of the tension they experience as a result of the comingling of these feelings within one confined physical space.

Pairing this notion of the indefinitely extending inner self with the violence theorists of chapter one creates a rich context in which to read Millay's poetry on the productive nature of internal violence. For example, Hannah Arendt's theorization of violence as instrumental is consistent with Millay's understanding of internal violence as productive for a construction of the natural self. Arendt also proposes the idea that violence is silent: "The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence" (Arendt, *On Revolution* 9). The latter half of Arendt's idea that "speech is helpless when confronted with violence," is similar to Žižek's notion of symbolic objective violence. Arendt articulates the notion that language is inadequate for fully conveying the effects of violence and of meaning in general for that matter. It suggests a certain confinement from the outside in which we are forced to modify our thoughts and meaning to fit a convention. However, Arendt's opening point that "violence itself is incapable of speech," has unique implications for Freud's notion of the boundless inward self. The experience of internal violence is so painful, idiosyncratic, and seminal to the formation of the self, that it often remains unintelligible to the individual that experiences it, let alone expressible to an external audience. This is consistent with Millay's quest to find the appropriate form for expressing these excruciating experiences in her poetry.

#### DISCOVERING AGENCY AND SELF-WORTH THROUGH INTERNAL VIOLENCE

In this section, I undertake to close read a handful of her poems, which exemplify her theme of the productive nature of internal violence. These poems are just a small sampling of a wide body of work intended to communicate this struggle of growth. It is important to note the variety of both form and content in this section. For Millay, internal

violence can manifest in confinement, as much as it can in overexertion. Each individual's process of reconciling the tendencies of self-destruction with those of self-worth can assume different modes. At the core of internal violence lies the individual's discovery and belief in his or her own value and agency. This agency may arise either during the struggle and experience of internal violence, as a conscious decision of how it will play out, or after the struggle, as the individual makes decisions about their strengths moving forward.

In her poem "Scrub," Millay articulates a specific form of internal violence: that which stems from an experience of external violence. In particular, this sonnet thematically explores the way in which being subjected to external violence leads to the construction of a particular version of the self. As fear takes hold of the individual, their self-repression leads to self-doubt and inner conflict, in an effort to both preserve the self and conform to an institutional standard of behavior.

If I grow bitterly,  
 Like a gnarled and stunted tree,  
 Bearing harshly of my youth  
 Puckered fruit that sears the mouth;  
 If I make of my drawn boughs  
 An Inhospitable House,  
 Out of which I never pry  
 Towards the water and the sky,  
 Under which I stand and hide  
 And hear the day go by outside;  
 It is that a wind too strong  
 Bent my back when I was young,  
 It is that I fear the rain  
 Lest it blister me again. (Millay, *Collected Poems* 160)

The final quatrain makes it clear that the violence experienced by the narrator served a disciplining function; thus, discipline, at first enforced by an external agent, is continued and perpetuated by the individual onto his or herself. The individual then

contributes to his or her own loss of self through acts of repression resulting from a conditioning that requires adherence to certain institutional expectations. This process can be summed up using Foucault's analysis of Mettray in which the disciplining authority of the jailers becomes internalized by the prisoners:

the principal punishment inflicted was confinement to one's cell; for isolation is the best means of acting on the moral nature of children; it is there above all that the voice of religion, even if it has never spoken to their hearts, recovers all its emotional power'; the entire parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell on the walls of which are written in black letters: 'God sees you.' (Lawrence 234-5)

This psychological understanding of the internalization of punishment through fear can be telescoped at macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. Telescoped outwards, the individual senses personal failure to the universe as they have failed the ultimate universal organizing figure. Telescoped inwards, this individual feels an intense paradoxical violation of privacy in their solitude. They are totally alone, yet they feel their every action being scrupulously examined. Under this pressure, they act the way they believe they should, rather than the way they inherently would have behaved.

Millay works through this paradox at the formal level, with the modification of the Shakespearean sonnet, whose rhyme scheme she changes from A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D-E-F-E-F-G-G to A-A-B-B-C-C-D-D-E-E-F-F-G-G (Fuller 14). On a general level, the sonnet form itself has been widely used to articulate heartbreak. Her use of this form carries the weight of the sonnet as a literary tradition and complies with what a reader might expect from this form. The choice to employ a closed rhyme scheme, as opposed

to the conventional interlacing rhyme scheme, allows the narrator to present the ideas in constructed isolation, magnifying the solitude embodied by the tree, and repressing any potential coalescence between the lines. Despite its departure from the original organization of the English sonnet rhyme scheme, the poem still presents six rhymes; Millay chooses to order the scheme sequentially.

Given the sense of confinement manifested in the content of this poem, her choice to employ a predictable rhyme scheme, is merely an echo of an obvious theme. This hyper-organization is a loaded rebellion; She alters the conventional to make it more conventional. The subtlety of her subversion is its strength.

Further, she manipulates the ways in which the lines are clustered. Although English sonnets are typically divided into three quatrains and an ending couplet, she changes the form to a quatrain, a sestet, and an ending quatrain. The first quatrain introduces a conflict between the tree and an external conditioning force. She uses words with particularly violent and destructive connotations to describe her transformation: “bitterly,” “gnarled,” “stunted,” “harshly,” “puckered,” and “sears.” This transformation is set up through very specific syntax: “I grow.” She owns this change, however, over the course of the sonnet, we see that she is in fact shrinking.

Although the tree she describes is unique, it cannot grow naturally due to a devastating disciplining event from its youth. Additionally, the damage from that event is being disseminated through the tree’s fruit. Further, the use of the verb “bearing” feminizes the destruction that is taking place, as only women can bear children. The offspring of this tree, however, is venomous as a result of the tree’s conditioning. This kind of violence is creative and productive, and consequently feminine. The fruit



symbolism also resounds with the apple of the creation story, which led to the first sin, an allusion to both her own sinfulness in the eyes of the influence that tried to reform her and the sinfulness of the impact of that intended reform on her soul. This sinfulness also manifests itself in the physical distortion of the tree. The specific searing of the mouth implies a destruction of language. Through this poem, Millay is once again seizing conventional Western modes of crafting culture and revising them.

The sextet that follows further develops this harbored bitterness, but transforms the tree slightly into a space of self-repression and withdrawal. She opens the sextet with a reaffirmation of the feminine creative properties with the again affirmative syntax: “I make.” By choosing to transform the tree into a “house” rather than a “home,” she conveys that she is not really herself in this space. A house is a structure that is built for rest and protection, but a home is a feeling of belonging. It is inhospitable because it is suffocating; physically one can picture the boughs as prison bars drawing up from the tree and repressing her natural impulses. She presents a complicated metaphor for a space, which, in necessarily restricting her from engaging with the world that does not accept her, is both a safe haven and a jail. In an act of self-confinement, she will “never pry” out of this space. This feeling of restraint is set on the backdrop of movement, the narrator sets up with the line-opening prepositions “out,” “towards,” and “under.” She is resistant to freedom, which we can note from both that line and the one that follows it, after having suffered at the hands of some disciplining force. Foucault’s concept of prison violence explains this phenomenon; the prisoner has internalized a psychology of repression.

At the core of these opening lines, however, lies a self-consciousness of her own undesirability. From the physical repulsiveness of being “gnarled” and “stunted” to the harmful affects of the fruit, this tree is isolated in its dual aesthetic and genealogical shortcomings. This awareness results in the “bitter” growth with which the narrator opens the poem. Thus, expansion, growth, and creation, in this context are outwardly violent in their repulsion, but inwardly violent in that the narrator realizes that she is unworthy of acceptance. This self-directed violence grows uncontrollably as the result of the disciplining violence articulated in the final four lines of the poem. This latter violence, however, exists to the end of destroying the unconformable tree. I will expand upon that violence in the paragraphs that follow.

In this middle set of lines, she also references water, a symbol that she complicates in the closing quatrain. In her refusal to leave her confinement in the boughs of the tree, she rejects this life-giving source. In the line that follows she claims to “stand and hide” which seems unusual; typically hiding involves shrinking one’s body to remain out of sight. Her listening to the “day go[ing] by outside” indicates a removal from normal life. She is isolated from routine processes of day-to-day life, and is only connected to them through her sense of hearing. This is also similar to an old-fashioned prison; the prisoner is aware that life is happening outside of the walls, but they are physically prevented from engaging with the outside world directly. Alternatively, this is the sensation of a depressed or sick person who can hear everyone else carrying on, and is only capable of engaging with the rest of the world in this passive way.

The opening couplet of the second quatrain begins to clarify why these mechanisms are necessary: “It is that a wind too strong/ Bent my back when I was

young.” As she plants more subtly in the first quatrain, an outside force tried to change her; to dissuade her from being her radical self. Because of the physical force that is expressed in these lines: “bend” and “blister,” we can understand this violence as masculine, its purpose to destroy. Foucault explains the dangers of this type of repression and this poem is an articulation of the consequences of external forces on her internal self. The violence, which she has experienced has resulted in her wielding violence towards herself.

The ending couplet of the second quatrain serves the same purpose as that of the orthodox English sonnet: to simultaneously summarize and complicate the lines that precede it. In other words, both cases present the ending couplet as a paradox, which contains a truth reconciling conflict. Throughout the poem, she perpetuates a paradoxical image of a tree: tough, yet vulnerable; sheltering, yet inhospitable; without explicit gender, yet sexualized. The last two lines add to her scarring past experience a fear that it will recur, in addition to the self-loathing that is expressed in the first quatrain. Edna St. Vincent Millay exposes her fragility, by presenting the desperate measures she felt were necessary to shield her true self, yet says “Despite it all, I am still standing.” The dual paradoxical themes that emerge as a result of this ending couplet are resistance and fear. Gray’s beautiful recommendation on how to read Millay illuminates the extent to which she is woven into this poem:

To remember her only as the nymph of Greenwich Village, exulting playfully in freedom, would be to turn away from nearly all that was of genuine importance to the experience, which she put herself through exquisite pain to communicate.

Seen whole she emerges out of myth not as a gay figure but as a tragic one; not as

a precocious perennial schoolgirl but as an artist born mature and burdened with a scrupulous sense of responsibility toward her gift; not as a changeling child of mysticism but as a creature whose essential desire was to find identity with the balanced order of nature; not as a woman merely but as a creator who inevitably contained within her persona masculine as well as feminine attributes. (Gray 6)

Gray's ideas and Millay's own themes are mirrored in the essence of the sonnet. Hirsch explains, "There is a sense of permanence and fragility, of spaciousness and constriction, about the sonnet form... The history of the sonnet is the history of its creations, its revisions and modifications, its distillations and expansions, its creative destructions" (Hirsch 51). Edna St. Vincent Millay, in linking inextricably the form and function of the sonnet to underscore the meaning of her poetry, demands that the reader reconsider "simplicity." Although the tree and the sonnet are simple forms, the reader must look past his or her initial expectations for this symbol and form, and seek meaning in the ways in which they've been adapted. In this way, she perpetuates her own story of being more than what she seems, and utilizes this productive mode of internal violence to discover her inner strength.

Much like "Scrub," "Sorrow" narrates the deeply personal and isolated moments of internal violence. Millay, in her belief that internal violence is productive, is still realistic about the often-paralyzing effects it can have. We feel the torment and raw feeling of the narrator as she experiences this pain in quiet solitude expressed by Millay.

It reads:

Sorrow, like a ceaseless rain  
 Beats upon my heart.  
 People twist and scream in pain,

Dawn will find them still again;  
 This has neither wax nor wane,  
 Neither stop nor start.

People dress and go to town;  
 I sit in my chair.  
 All my thoughts are slow and brown:  
 Standing up or sitting down  
 Little matters, or what gown  
 Or what shoes I wear. (Millay, *Collected Poems* 34)

The rhyme scheme here, as in “Scrub,” is somewhat unconventional. In Millay’s struggle to articulate intense pain, she experiments with a new form. She writes this poem over two sestets with the rhyme scheme A-B-A-A-A-B. This clusters the lines and ideas in an asymmetrical fashion that is less confined than “Scrub” in the sense that the rhymes are somewhat interlaced, and more confined in that there are only 4 ending sounds in the entire poem.

The imagery of rain reappears in “Sorrow” with a haunting and violent agency, as early as the opening lines: “Sorrow, like a ceaseless rain / beats upon my heart.” She invites the reader into a very private and violent pain: the attack of her heart. In other words, this poem opens with an attack on the most obvious symbol of both physical and emotional health. The heart is where personality lies because it is where we store our emotions. The heart disseminates blood to our entire body. This image is presented in an eerily soothing fashion, the beating like the beating of a drum rather than an abusive assault. Millay does not invoke angry shocking subjective violence, but rather uses the quiet psychological objective violence of language. The calmness and simplicity with which this act of deeply intimate violence is relayed stands in stark contrast to the line that follows: “People twist and scream in pain.” The subject of the poem suddenly

flashes from a narration of intimate sensory experience, to a narration of the public reaction to overt violence. With the shift in subject from “my” to “people,” the narrator simultaneously creates a distance between the reader and himself, while providing a universal entry point for the reader as a part of this mass. In this way, she at once familiarizes the reader with the experience, while distancing the reader from herself.

The next three lines are enigmatic, as she shifts back to a certain calmness in order to let glimmers of an ironic hope into the poem: “Dawn will find them still again; / This has neither wax nor wane, / Neither stop nor start.” The cyclical, perennial nature of pain she is describing is both hopeful and hopeless. There is an undeniable comfort in the universality of this struggle, but its inescapability renders it overwhelming. In this way, in a similar fashion to societal institutions, this experience unites us as it tortures us. The lunar imagery of waxing and waning further perpetuates this cyclicity, while charging it with a natural, feminine symbolism; this pain and universal experience are natural at some level and governed by some feminine agent.

The next stanza pulls us back into the personal misery and solitude of the narrator. Much like in “Scrub,” her isolation becomes tangible in the separation of the “people” who go about their daily lives anonymously, while she sits alone. Millay achieves this retreat back into the narrator’s self by changing the subject back from “people” to “I.”

As opposed to the sense of movement in the first sextet, with the beating rain, the twisting and screaming, and the cyclical continuation of life, this sextet conveys stillness. The limited movement that is referenced seems forced and belabored. The verbs are far less dynamic: “dress,” “go,” “sit,” “are,” “wear.” She is passive and reflective. In this

stanza, she owns her “thoughts,” rather than in the previous stanza where she owns her “heart.” These thoughts are “slow and brown:” the mud that follows a rainstorm.

Her isolated and contemplative tone in the last stanza evoke the kind of thinking that, as Foucault asserts, occurs in prisons. The narrator, confines herself to her home to reflect upon some past action. She diminishes the significance of her present decisions, in light of some past mistakes: saying, “Standing up or sitting down / Little matters.” In other words, she rejects the notion that the consequences of her decisions will have any importance to her existence. In doing so, she isolates herself from her decisions, and thus, from some piece of her identity. As a result, we can understand this poem as a narration of the consequences of internal violence; the narrator does not believe in her own capacity to improve or impact her situation.

In her most well known poem, “First Fig,” Millay works through a psychology that is totally antithetical to the paralysis she describes above, narrating instead a story of intense and ceaseless action. These approaches to life, as divergent from each other as they may seem, ultimately result in an individual who is left with a lack of agency. The poem reads:

My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –  
It gives a lovely light! (Millay, *Collected Poems* 127)

Christopher Beach offers a useful starting point for how we can understand “First Fig” as a narration of internal violence, noting that the candle “corresponds to her vision of herself as depleted, brutalized, or objectified at the cost of some genuine sense of self-worth” (Beach 75). In other words, her quest for self worth and propensity to constantly

engage with the world through action leaves her exhausted. The sense of urgency in the poem itself also suggests a certain violence and brutality of time and of the times. In terms of the brutality of time, she addresses the reality of the temporal material world in which she lives: “the candle...will not last the night.” She feels compelled to act so that she doesn’t miss a moment of opportunity; there is a keen and intense sense of simultaneous self-preservation and self-destruction set up in a cyclical way. She lives in a way that is bombastic and outrageous in order to seize all human experience for herself; but this zealous lifestyle results in ultimate self-destruction as the zeal turns to recklessness. However, this recklessness is just as much a rebellion against the social system, as it is recognition of her worldly realities. We can be certain of this given her direct and explicit address of her “friends and “foes,” the people that presumably support or reject her style of living. Thus, her burning light also shows the ways in which institutional violence, always seeking to rectify society’s outliers, pushes these outliers to extremes. The narrator acknowledges that she will soon be exhausted, but until then, will continue to lead her reckless life, burning her candle “at both ends.”

Beach notes the physical dimension of this recklessness as a product of the times, writing:

To ‘burn the candle at both ends’ is to live life to its fullest potential, a potential only made possible for a young woman like Millay by a new social, sexual, and artistic freedom. The poem is constructed around a single image, the candle, which clearly serves as a metaphor for the female body. Not only does the conceit of the burning candle refer to the traditional idea of the ‘burning with desire,’ but the idea of the body as a candle suggests a site of pleasure that can be



also consumed by its own flame. [...] It can represent Millay's social role as a female poet who packages her body for consumption by a large and enthusiastic public. (Beach 75)

Beach's understanding of the symbol of the candle falls short only in his oversight of the her description of it's light as "lovely." She chooses an adjective that softens the violence in the lines the precedes it, and draws attention to the pressure of the woman to appear docile, lady-like, and "lovely," while at the same time masking intense sexual desire. This also provides us with another mode of understanding the symbol of the candle burning at both ends: exhausted from the expectations of fulfilling two roles, that of her natural desires, and that of her prescribed feminine gender role. Both of these modes of feminine agency: the "sexual" and the "lovely," are fleeting. But she is also rewriting what it means to be "lovely." Her sexual dynamism and brightly burning candle are "lovely."

Given this dual preoccupation with the female body and time, it is important to recognize it as a gesture towards the tradition of "carpe diem" poems. Joseph Moldenhauer usefully summarizes this genre as follows:

The carpe diem poem, whose label comes from a line of Horace and whose archetype for Renaissance poets was a lyric by Catullus, addresses the conflict of beauty and sensual desire on the one hand and the destructive force of time on the other. Its theme is the fleeting nature of life's joys; its counsel, overt or implied, is Horace's 'seize the present,' or in the language of Herrick's 'To the Virgins,' 'Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,/ Old Time is still a flying.' It takes rise from the most pervasive and aesthetically viable of all Renaissance preoccupations,

man's thralldom to time, the limitations of mortality upon his senses, his pleasures [...] Whether subdued or gamesome in town, it appeals to the young and beautiful to make their own for a while, to indulge in the 'harmless folly' of sensual enjoyment. (Moldenhauer 190)

Reading "First Fig" through this lens reminds us, yet again, of Millay's poetic project as one that seeks to revise Western cultural modes of expression. She appropriates a genre, most often used to articulate a masculine urgency to consummate love, and revises it by imposing upon it a feminine poetic voice. The result is a much more internally violent notion of sex; for the male poet, this poem necessitates the conquest of a female body, for Millay, this poem necessitates the agency to use her body to fulfill her own desires. Thus, the struggle becomes internally overcoming the impositions of society, rather than dominating another person.

Her poem, "The Oak Leaves," narrates a similar struggle to both survive within the order of society, which in this case symbolized by nature, while still preserving the self, which in this case is represented by the leaves. In this poem, however, the tree rather than go out in flames trying to preserve the entirety of its identity, as the woman does in "First Fig," cedes pieces of itself slowly. The transformation in nature is less dramatic, the timeline less urgent; the seasons meld together in a way that a candle in burning from both ends simply cannot afford to do. Millay works through how the tree resists the pressures of winter, and celebrates the leaves that are "the last to sigh enough."

The poem reads:

Yet in the end, defeated too, worn out and ready to fall,  
Hangs from the drowsy tree with cramped and desperate stem above the ditch the  
last leaf of all.

There is something to be learned, I guess, from looking at the dead leaves under  
the living tree;  
Something to be set to a lusty tune and learned and sung, it well might be;  
Something to be learned—though I was ever a ten-o'clock scholar at this  
school—  
Even perhaps by me.

But my heart goes out to the oak-leaves that are the last to sigh  
“Enough,” and lose their hold;  
They have boasted to the nudging frost and to the two-and-thirty winds that they  
would never die,  
Never even grow old.  
(These are those russet leaves that cling  
All winter, even into spring,  
To the dormant bough, in the wood knee-deep in the snow the only coloured  
thing.) (Millay, *Collected Poems* 275)

Much like “My Candle Burns at Both Ends,” “The Oak Leaves” tells a tale of  
resistance, persistence, and self-preservation. We can understand how Millay works  
through a psychology of internal violence by considering the tree. From season to  
season, the tree endures the cold, but relinquishes pieces of itself. This partial  
surrendering of the self allows the tree to survive. If we are to understand the nature as a  
symbol of systemic objective violence, and the tree as an individual seeking to survive  
within this system, the analogy becomes clear; the disciplining function of nature forces  
us to surrender the “colorful” parts of our being. This transformation of the self is the  
consequence of internal violence.

The last leaves that hold steadfast are the final impulses of self-preservation: the  
notion of clinging to a piece of color in the dark winter. This powerful tension wears the  
tree down; it is a “drowsy” tree, a “dormant” bough. Still there is a piece of its spirit that

lives through the last leaves; it is a “living” tree. In other words, the tree allows for and surrenders to its destruction in order to survive, even though it is no longer the same version of itself. Millay draws attention to the final leaves by making them the object of the narrator’s admiration. These leaves, despite the knowledge that they will eventually be forced to submit to the will of nature, violently resist. They “boast to the nudging frost...that they would never die / Never even grow old.”

In contrast, the narrator is very hesitant to praise the “dead leaves” under the tree; in fact, she contrasts them with the “living tree” of which they were once a part, establishing a hierarchy between the two. She says there is “something to be learned from them,” whereas “her heart goes out to the oak leaves that are the last to sigh.” She is compelled by the latter, a sentiment that she expresses as much through her poetic language as she does with her use of the active voice. In contrast, she uses the passive voice when she refers to the dead leaves.

Her dismissive tone regarding her perspective on the dead leaves can be best explained using this anecdote from her time at Vassar:

She took class in dramatic literature from President Henry Noble MacCracken, who one morning received a ‘sick excuse’ from her, only to see her in lively health an hour later on campus. When he confronted her, she looked solemnly at him and said: ‘Prexy, at the moment of your class, I was in pain with a poem.’ Taking a long-range view of her many infraction, he told her later he would never vote for her expulsion, adding, ‘I don’t want to have any dead Shelleys on my doorstep. (Griffith 468)

In other words, for Millay, valuable intellectual experiences manifested themselves in emotional struggle, rather than in conventional “learning” environments. She identifies with the last leaves because she understands that it is the colorful portions of each individual, the pieces that pursue self-preservation that provide for a violent, yet rewarding life experience. This poem, unlike most of her other internally violent poems, portrays a hopeful possibility for the internally violent individual; the possibility of redemption through authenticity and grit. The use of natural imagery lends an element of stability to this type violence and enhances the theme of hope, particularly through the use of the seasons. In projecting the cyclicity of the seasons, there is a sense that life will continue. Even with the death of winter, there is hope in the resurrection of springtime. However, the tree will never be able to draw upon the same leaves again; the individual has fundamentally changed as a result of enduring the winter. The struggle to retain leaves and resist change is the internal violence, whose representation falls short of human internal violence, because of the inability of the tree to have emotions. Nonetheless, this annual process is dramatic for the tree and on all of the organisms that rely on all of the resources that the tree provides.

The more bombastic resistant Millay of “First Fig” comes out in the line that reads “something to be learned/ even perhaps by me.” She recognizes that she has very little in common with the dead leaves under the tree and, thus, separates herself from this kind of knowledge. She can “learn from them” in the sense that these pieces of the tree, this resignation, is radically different from her approach to life. They ease the tension that Millay finds productive, and thus, disrupt the growth of this individual. It is through the last leaves and their struggle to cling on and remain true, that the tree grows.

Although ultimately the tree must shed them in order to survive, just as the individual is conditioned by society to shed certain unconventional aspects of themselves, the process of resistance, struggle, and internal violence is productive for Millay's poetic project.

#### CONCLUSION

These four poems: "Scrub," "Sorrow," "First Fig," and "Oak Leaves," shed light on several different aspects of internal violence. An interested reader might look into her other works "Sonnet," and "Small Hands, Relinquish All," among others. In general, these poems all indicate the intense emotional experience and solitude of internal violence. "Scrub" and "Sorrow" exemplify the effects of extreme negative external influences. In "Scrub" the narrator articulates the pain of self-repulsion, while in "Sorrow," the narrator describes paralyzing internal chaos. They serve as manifestos of self-doubt: the onset of internal violence, which creates the triggers the impulse of self-preservation. The isolation of both of the narrators as they retreat into themselves gestures can be aptly understood using Freud's concept of the boundless internal self.

On the other extreme, "First Fig," and "Oak Leaves," are tales of resistance and perseverance. "First Fig," captures the violence of urgency of desperation to over-exertion seize all human experience for herself. She is reckless and this is her form of agency: the choice to be the mover of her own demise. The redefining of "lovely" as an adjective that can encompass recklessness and fervor, not only gestures towards Cixous' discussion of the culturally productive role of women, but also towards Zizek's notion symbolic violence and the limits of language. This mode of internal violence is productive in her undeniable volition as much as it is in her refreshing conceptualization

of womanhood and what it means to be “lovely.” She resists the confinement of language and contributes her own meaning to this loaded word, while asserting her own value as a bombastic woman. “Oak Leaves” celebrates a similar boldness channeled by the final oak leaves that “sigh ‘enough’.” These leaves are stubborn; they are the parts of the individual that say: “I matter.” It is in their boast, in their colorful presence in the midst of winter, even with the knowledge that their days are coming to a close that mimics the rapidly burning candle. Their agency is resistance to expectation.

Millay’s ultimate concern with this mode of violence, as articulated in these poems and as framed by these thinkers, is its ultimate effect of producing an impulse to agency in its victims. Each individual’s experience of this violence is different, and thus this agency may arise at different points in their struggle. Nonetheless, the experience of resistance entails a belief that there is something worth preserving. This “something” is discovered deep within the self during the internal struggle.

## CONCLUSION

*“This feeling of impotence was mine, not yours, quite obviously. It is I on this earth who am laboring under the sensation of sans. A sensation merely, a semblance of sans, fright of the self before the new senses of all senses, weakness of my step that is learning to walk/work otherwise my impotence.”*

--Cixous, The Flying Manuscript

In just a few words, Helene Cixous captures the essence of Millay’s poetic project: beautifully and simply summing up what occurs at the intersection of internal and external violence. Written from the perspective of an individual who has clearly been subjected to violence and has internalized a powerful current of self-loathing, this quote works through what it means to feel like one must define his or herself as nothing, as the absence of something, as “sans.” Per Cixous’ articulation, this burden of worthlessness is tempered by a productive process of self-discovery. In other words, systemic violence and violence of language, both modes of objective violence, work from the outside to evoke this sensation of impotence from individuals who do not conform. They work to condition these individuals to feel incapable of contributing to society unless they submit to institutional standards. Thus, their goal, in an extreme sense, is to alienate individuals from their own true identities in order to promote a smooth functioning of society. Consequently, these individuals adopt these feelings of rejection and undergo an inner struggle to simultaneously repress their “inadequacies” and preserve their true selves. Although Millay provides numerous examples of resistance to



this pressure to conform and submit, ultimately, she sees the process of facing internal violence as productive. She celebrates the individuals who are willing to absorb this friction, and in her writing depicts them as ultimately growing throughout their processes of reconciling their self-loathing and self-preservation. Much of this impulse probably stems from her own unconventional and rebellious nature, but her use of this lens to understand society is quintessentially modernist. From its skepticism to its simplicity, Millay's critique of society is as intellectually complex and worth considering as her male modernist counterparts'.

Through her theme of external violence, she provides her readers with a framework for understanding institutional violence as having feminine agency by appropriating objective violence as feminine. Specifically, she calls upon the maternal tropes of womanhood: woman as nurturing, woman as productive, in order to show the ways in which institutions play a similar role in society, shaping future generations by producing, enforcing, and perpetuating acceptable standards of identity. In doing so, she illuminates the immense power of institutions. This notion, in itself, serves as a challenge to her critics that write her off as merely feminist. She uses feminine symbolism to explain a system about which she is harshly critical.

Her theme of internal violence serves a slightly different function. In working through the psychology and motivations of internal violence, she enters into a discussion about resistance and resilience. She spares no details in her descriptions of the pain, cruelty, and struggle that internally violent individuals must experience. However, it is her brutal honesty in this area that legitimizes and empowers her hopeful message of the growth the results from internal violence. For her, inwardly directed violence, even when

it is the product of an experience of external violence, result in authentic emotion. In other words, when pieces of the self are threatened, the parts of the self that emerge to protect it are the essence of human emotion. Her poetry treats this kind of violence predominantly on a psychological level.

Her poem, “The Suicide” serves to show some of the intimate connections between internal and external violence under the most extreme circumstances. Suicide is the most tremendous and deeply personal mode of internal violence. That being said, a suicide disrupts the community in indescribable ways, prompting reconsiderations from those close to the act: about their relationships with that individual, about their own lifestyle, and about their own mortality. Thus, this act is deeply and clearly influential on personal public levels. In this poem, Life takes on the agency of the narrator’s companion. From the onset, we can understand this personal detachment from Life; or separation of the actions of Life and his own actions as a sign that he has been traumatized. He has been alienated from a piece of his identity as a consequence of his victimization at the hands of violence. The poem opens with the narrator denouncing Life’s abuses:

Curse thee, Life, I will live with thee no more!  
 Thou hast mocked me, starved me, beat my body sore!  
 And all for a pledge that was not pledged by me,  
 I have kissed thy crust and eaten sparingly  
 That I might eat again, and met thy sneers  
 With deprecations, and thy blows with tears  
 [...]

The narrator is indignant, not only for the cruelty, but at Life’s entitlement in inflicting it upon him. This sense of entitlement or “pledge not pledged by [him]” is the same sense of entitlement that institutions assume in society. Their authority is not willfully granted

by each individual, but rather forcefully asserted by the institution itself. The narrator responds to the abuse the way he believes he should: “eating sparingly that [he] might eat again,” and meeting “blows with tears.” Yet, still, the narrator is persecuted relentlessly.

The poem continues:

[...] I have been heated in thy fires,  
 Bent by thy hands, fashioned to thy desires,  
 Thy mark is on me! I am not the same  
 Now ever more shall be, as when I came.  
 Ashes am I of all that once I seemed.  
 In me all's sunk that leapt, and all that dreamed  
 Is wakeful for alarm, - oh, shame to thee,  
 For the ill change that thou hast wrought in me  
 Who laugh no more nor lift my throat to sing!  
 Ah, Life, I would have been a pleasant thing  
 To have about the house when I was grown  
 If thou hadst left my little joys alone!  
 I asked of thee no favor save this one:  
 That thou wouldst leave me playing in the sun!  
 And this thou didst deny, calling my name  
 Insistently, until I rose and came.  
 I saw the sun no more. -It were not well  
 So long on these unpleasant thoughts to dwell,  
 Need I arise tomorrow and renew  
 Again my hated tasks, but I am through  
 With all things save my thoughts and this one night;  
 So that in truth I see already quite  
 Free and remote from thee, -- I feel no haste  
 And no reluctance to depart. (Millay, *Collected Poems* 25)

In acknowledging that he has been “heated,” “bent,” “fashioned,” and “marked” by Life, the narrator describes some of the changes that he has unwillingly been forced to undergo. The narrator is “ashes” of what he once was. He understands his own destruction at the hands of death and perceives his best course of action to “leave.” Specifically, his destruction took the form of being prevented from “playing in the sun,” which for him, was central to his identity. Life had other plans for him and instead assigned him “hated tasks.” In other words, he was forced to take on responsibilities and

roles that were outside of his realm of comfort. He did not feel able to express himself or behave as his true self. Again, Millay calls attention to the role of institutions in creating unfair expectations and burdens, that privilege convention over happiness and fulfillment. That being said, this pain and recognition of the abuse is in itself a peak human experience for Millay. Once an oppressor is identified, it can be resisted.

Her poetic project embodies this, not only at a thematic level, but also at a formal level through her appropriation and rewriting of traditional Western cultural modes of expression, like the sonnet, the fairytale, the biblical text. Thus, at its most basic: her poetic project is predicated upon memory. Memory plays a central role both in terms of understanding her adaptations and revisions of form, and in terms of understanding the true power of violence. Memory is both what triggers violent acts, and what propels victims of these acts into internal violence. It allows for the perpetuation of violent strategies, as they are remembered and recreated. It motivates violence in an effort to recover or destroy the past. It is also where versions of the self are created and stored. Millay's poetic project engages with memory as she constructs the way she will be remembered: as a woman, a poet, and an artisan of violent feminine agency.

## WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Barfoot, C.C. "Edna St. Vincent Millay's Sonnets: Putting 'Chaos Into Fourteen Lines.'" *Uneasy Alliance: Twentieth Century American Literature, Culture and Biography*. Ed. Hans Bak. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. 80–100. Print.
- Beach, Christopher. *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène and Peggy Kamuf. "The Flying Manuscript." *New Literary History* 37.1 (2006): 15–46. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or a Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman." *New Literary History* 19.1 (1987): 1–21. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.
- Faith, Karlene. "Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and Feminism." *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice*. Ed. H. Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam. London: Sage, 1994. 36–66. Print. *Inquiries in Social Construction*.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon, 1984. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. London: Penguin Classics, 2002. Print.
- Fuller, John. *The Sonnet*. Ed. John D. Jump. London: Methuen, 1972. Print. *The Critical Idiom*
- 26.

Gray, James. *Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967.

Print.

Griffith, Benjamin. "Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Literary Phenomenon." *The Sewanee Review*

111.3 (2003): 463–470. Print.

Hermansson, Casie. *Bluebeard: A Reader's Guide to the English Tradition*. Jackson:

University Press of Mississippi, 2009. Print.

Hirsch, Edward, and Eavan Boland. "The Making of a Sonnet: A Formal Introduction." *The*

*Making of a Sonnet*. Ed. Hirsch and Boland. New York: Norton, 2008. 51-54. Print.

Kerfoot, Deborah, and David Knights. "Into the Realm of the Fearful: Power, Identity and the

Gender Problematic." *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice*. Ed. H.

Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam. London: Sage, 1994. 67–88. Print. Inquiries in

Social Construction.

Lawrence, Bruce B. and Aisha Karim, eds. *On Violence: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University

Press, 2007. Print.

*Mettray: From 1839 to 1856*. Knowsley Pamphlet Collection. London: W. and F.G. Cash,

1856. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.

Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Norma Ellis Millay. New York: Harper, 1956.

Print.

Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Collected Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Rev. and Expanded ed.

New York: Perennial Library, 1988. Print.

Moldenhauer, Joseph. "The Voices of Seduction in 'To His Coy Mistress:' A Rhetorical

Analysis." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*." 189-206. Print.

*The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 1. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994. Print.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Brookes More. Boston: Cornhill, 1922.

Owen, Wilfred. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1963.

Print.

Parini, Jay, ed. *The Columbia History of American Poetry*. New York: Columbia University

Press, 1993. Print.

Pound, Ezra. *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1976. Print.

A New Directions Book.

Ransom, John Crowe. "The Poet as Woman." *The Southern Review* 2.4 (1936): 783–806.

Print.

Schodde, Carla. "Rape Culture in Classical Mythology." *Found in Antiquity*. Web. 27 Mar.

2014.

Statius, P. Papinius. *Achilleid*. Exeter, Devon, UK: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2005. Print. Classic

Editions from Bristol Phoenix Press.

Villa, Dana. "Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975." *The Review of Politics* 71.1 (2009): 20–36. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1st Harvest/HBJ ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, 1989. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. New Collected ed. New York:

Macmillan, 1933. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. 1st Picador ed. New York: Picador, 2008.

Print. Big Ideas/Small Books.