

Edna St. Vincent Millay's *A Few Figs from Thistles*

'Constant only to the Muse' and
Not To Be Taken Lightly¹

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ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the complicated production and reception of Edna St. Vincent Millay's early poetry, especially that of *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Millay's language of gender and sexual liberation in this 1920s volume received the label of "light verse," valences of which continue to affect readings across Millay's oeuvre. Looking to resituate the critical severity of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, this piece uses archival research and material culture to rethink the volume's original appearance and Millay's later release of two "revised" editions. Rather than recant rhetorically on the text's idiom of the *New Woman*, these redactions function as strategies for its critical redistribution. Unable to remain the equivalent of a radical figure above reality of consequence, the Millay of *A Few Figs from Thistles* reflects a poetic consciousness that understands the intricate nature of social resistance.

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!
Faithless am I save to love's self alone.
Were you not lovely I would leave you now:
After the feet of beauty fly my own.
[. . .] So wanton, light and false, my love, are you,
I am most faithless when I am most true. (MILLAY 1920, Sonnet III)

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I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year,
Ere I forget, or die, or move away
[. . .] Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking. (MILLAY 1920, Sonnet IV)

Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* examines the "gendering of history" through her textual analyses of literary femininity, as constructed by both men and women writers, in order to build a "multi-perspectival" viewpoint from which "to unravel the complexities of modernity's relationship to femininity" (1995, 7). Felski fixes a critical focus on *modernity*—understood as "the more general experience of the aestheticization of everyday life" (13)—as key to approaching "past women's and men's own understanding of their positioning within historical and social processes" (1995, 8). In *Making Love Modern*, Nina Miller follows Felski's lead, situating the up-thrust of her study according to the intensity of women writers' engagements with modernity. Even more specifically, Miller's framework of *subcultural self-understanding* leads her to examine New York urban groups affiliated with a modern experience of distance from normative society. Important for Miller:

An urban formation and, by definition, oppositional, artistic subculture sets itself apart from the dominant bourgeois order in a posture of critique, distance, or, at least, ambivalence. More than a position, the subcultural posture marks a certain kind of person—quintessentially modern, defining herself in the paradoxical space of insider (to the subculture)/outsider (to the mainstream). (1999, 6)

Here, Miller outlines conditions that work to produce a greater sensitivity to popular recognitions (or lack thereof) by mainstream culture, as a subcultural position not only sets the critical stage for detecting the publicity of women's writing and women's engagement within the public sphere, but also gives critical visibility to modern women writers who were "actively invested in the sphere of public value, shaping and responding to public debate, and defining identity in relation to the terms of a public ethos" (1999, 7).

A twentieth-century text that intervened in public notions of modern femininity and that continues to be marked by negotiations of its cultural value and visibility, *A Few Figs from Thistles* helped launch the poet Edna

St. Vincent Millay's national career into an iconic literary spotlight. Despite the volume's significance to Millay's legacy, critics (both contemporary and recent) have largely labeled this text "light verse", qualitatively separating it from a larger body of Millay's "more serious" poetic work. Yet, *A Few Figs from Thistles*—a volume that positioned Millay for becoming the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry—did serious work within and yet against the established poetics and gendered ideologies of her time.

In *A Few Figs from Thistles*, Millay crafted an idiom of the New (or unconventional) Woman that radically engaged the modern female experience of everyday life according to a public discourse built upon traditional notions of gender, class, and sexuality. The text's language of resistance, enacted largely via a fluidity of female identification, refused conformity as either a backward-looking loyalty to preexisting ideals or a forward-looking concern with predetermined possibility. Indeed, Millay's New Woman staunchly denied and undermined domestic pressures to subscribe to patriarchal systems of women's value and self-identification: maternal pleasure in keeping house, monogamous satisfaction in choosing loyalty over promiscuity, pious pride in displaying aversions to capriciousness and impermanence, &c. As such, this text produced complex threats to a (gendered) social order, demanding both forthright sexuality and uncompromised sophistication, and opting for the kind of malleable performativity celebrated by later feminist theorists and activists.

Significant work has been done to revisit the importance of Millay's poetry. Critics like Will Brantley have noted Millay's unique use of voice and performance as highly subversive and often radically challenging preconceived gender roles and expectations (BRANTLEY 1991, 134). On its own terms, the New Woman constructed in the originary moment of *A Few Figs from Thistle* ruled supreme and, despite the odds, she did so with seemingly aesthetic, cultural, and political effortlessness. When not focusing exclusively on a short list of iconic poems or on Millay's modernization of the sonnet form,² however, the majority of the work that treats *A Few Figs from Thistles* maintains some essence of this volume as having been

2. In poet Molly Peacock's assessment, "Millay made what some would call a minor art—that is, she reinvigorated a traditional verse form, the sonnet, reclaiming it for a woman's voice—about the major themes of love and death. She was as uncompromising in her devotion to the rules of verse as she was in her flaunting of social rules. My guess is that Millay would not have held these two ideas as contradictions, but only as the opposition of forces that create from the energy of the lived life, an art driven by that life's energy" (2001, 116).

created on the apprentice continuum of Millay's poetic teleology.³ Scholars who routinely cite the differences between the verse of *A Few Figs from Thistles* and Millay's other poems come to chart, in particular, a developmental narrative of maturation. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau articulate the popular opinion of where *A Few Figs from Thistles* fits into Millay's career:

Though some reviewers found it too flippant, audiences of the early 1920s, especially female readers, strongly associated with the work and saw it as emblematic of the era. *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* is characterized by a more contemplative tone, which would continue to become more prominent over the course of her career [. . .] The light, cynical personae of *A Few Figs from Thistles* are replaced here by sympathetic voices of women enduring hardship and sorrow. (2006, 220)

This teleology has inflected even the more generous Millay scholarship. Schoenberg and Trudeau clearly appreciate Millay's boldness; however, they also echo the critical responses of Millay's day by explaining how the "light, cynical" tone of *A Few Figs from Thistles* develops into the "more contemplative tone" of *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*. While the verses in *A Few Figs from Thistles* revel in a hard, bright wit, those in *The Harp-Weaver* acknowledge "hardship and sorrow"—a more appropriately mature, in Schoenberg's and Trudeau's view, territory for a female poet to inhabit.

Even Suzanne Clark, who has been at the frontline of the effort to recuperate Millay's significance to literary and feminist studies, has rehearsed and recovered her own reaction to what she first perceived as "immaturity" in the poet's early work. In "Uncanny Millay" she writes, "Yet I, like so many, also associated her with adolescence and the identity crises of adolescence [. . .] Even sympathetic readers, including myself, thought of the figure of the girl in her poems as a mark of immaturity" (1995, 12). Clark, in her attempt to salvage Millay's poetics from the innocuous nature of the immature poet, goes on to say:

The mistake here was to read her work as if the trying on of identity associated with the adolescent were something to give up with maturity and as if the multiple identities dramatized by her poems could be coalesced into the figure of a girl and labeled immature by their very

3. See, for example, PERLMUTTER 1977, FRIED 1986, and HUBBARD 1995.

multiplicity. I would like to suggest that Millay has more to do with the way literature [. . .] is the locus of such a trying on of identities. (1995, 12)

Clark is right here to push us to reconsider, on the one hand, the political potency of trying on multiple identities and, on the other hand, the performative imperative of the literary space itself.

The production history of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, however, suggests an even more complicated relationship to such celebrations of Millay's idiomatic intervention into crises of identity, especially in relation to issues of class, gender, and sexuality. In particular, the volume's original 1920 appearance presented a rhetorical defiance that sets it apart from the book's subsequent editions. More specifically, the later 1921 and 1922 iterations, after a contested critical reception, began a process of complicating the voice, converting the original and more singular persona into the increasingly varied and fragmented personae discussed by critics.

Some of the more recent scholarship does not seem to subscribe to the development narrative that places Millay's early work on an evaluative scale of maturity. For instance, Miller's feminist project uses cultural studies methodology to offer both material grounding and critical insight for questions concerning women's literary strategy. Miller positions 1920s Millay as representative of "New Womanhood" and an assertive female sexuality that worked to focus the culture's ambivalence about contemporary social change. Miller writes:

Through a poetry that was equal parts transgressive and traditional, Millay provided symbolic access to modernity for her national audience. In the Village, she served to anchor bohemian identity in Free Love, the pursuit of authentic intimate relations without interference from artificial constraints, legal or social, or their psychological residue, jealousy. No mere hedonism, the personal transformation upon which this ideal depended was seen explicitly as part of wider cultural and political change. [. . .] And for women writers of modernist subcultural New York[,] she was a powerful model for their own struggle to reconcile the competing demands of a simultaneously public, iconic, and literary femininity. (1999, 17)

Melissa Girard's essay "Jeweled Bindings: Modernist Women's Poetry and the Limits of Sentimentality" also reflects on how Millay's bohemianism added philosophical and aesthetic depth to her early poetry, arguing that "the gendered body represents a complex material through which Millay

manipulates the expressive and autobiographical conventions of the traditional lyric. . . Millay plays with 'pretty' surfaces—in this case, beauty and body—to challenge the superficiality typically associated with this feminine stuff" (2012, 113). In *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture*, Catherine Keyser positions the appearance of Millay's verse (and prose satires) in urban "smart magazines" as highly manipulative and subversive—a literary strategy for exploring a range of modern anxieties, for crafting ironic stances of critique concerning the stereotypes on display within the very pages of such mass-market magazines, and for scrutinizing female "urbane sophisticates" as a feminine identity associated with both success and triviality. For Keyser, Millay's use of humor helped her to successfully establish a public ethos within and yet against influential magazine images of urban femininity, effectively distorting the artificiality of gender and sexuality circulated across class boundaries. Indeed, as such scholarly work reinforces, Millay's early poetic idiom (especially that of *A Few Figs from Thistles*) was far more culturally and critically complex than the dominant conversation has duly recognized.

The question remains, then, as to why so many critics continue to consider poems in this volume separate from Millay's larger oeuvre. As with so many questions of literary reception, the answers seem to lie, at least in part, in the material record of *A Few Figs from Thistles*' literary production. As Jerome McGann has argued, texts result from complex networks of communicative exchanges that begin when a text enters production (1991, 61–62).⁴

To better contribute to the intellectual pressure of scholars like Miller, Keyser, and Girard, who each offer interpretations of Millay's early poetry that work against its critical delimitations, I suggest the need for an archivally-renewed light of inquiry for Millay's poetic idiom of the New Woman, understanding that the push against a narrow critical reception requires not only engaging the cultural factors of her time, but also the volume's difficult publication history and subsequent strategic replies.⁵

4. In *The Textual Condition*, McGann studies texts as social conditions and investigates the various intersections/influences (many unpredictable) that audiences have with and upon the text and textual development. Like McGann, this particular study charts its investigations along the double helix of a work's reception history and its production history. For more on this field as it relates to modernism, see also BORNSTEIN 1991 and 2001.

5. While successful in reevaluating the importance and impact of Millay's early poetry, each of these scholarly contributions smuggles a misconception about

What's more, tracing the textual development of *A Few Figs from Thistles* and recovering a more complete story of Millay's early poetic production suggests a more complex relation among Millay's oeuvre. Through archival research and a reception history that rehearses the volume's convoluted journey into print, including unpublished correspondence and early manuscript materials, we can better determine the interconnectedness that this volume has with other poetic works and the seriousness of its social interventions, which spanned the poet's career.

Such attention should further enhance the nature of conversations concerning the literary and cultural interventions enacted by idioms shaped and reshaped by women poets. As the material record will evidence, aesthetically and thematically discursive strains throughout Millay's poetry suggest a need to rethink our efforts to map authoritative accounts onto the oeuvres of such poets. Not only does Millay's example warn against critical approaches that risk rehearsing trajectories, but it also highlights the danger of conversations and methodologies that rely too heavily on narratives built around the attractiveness of concepts like artistic maturation or poetic progress. Training a corrective focus on the (largely unchecked) reality of the text's production and reception history should disarm some of the more injurious critical attention currently clouding the idiom of the New Woman that Millay crafted within the original appearance of *A Few Figs from Thistles*. In addition, Millay's subsequent 1921 and 1922 "revisions" to the volume further trouble narratives or notions of progress, as these "revisions" demonstrate unique concerted efforts to navigate the problematically gendered terrain of Millay's time, effectively negotiating the aesthetic and critical resistance faced by modern American women writing during the first half of the twentieth century.

To avoid problematically reducing Millay's early creative identity into a single or rigid "girl", more readers and scholars should rethink such moves

A Few Figs from Thistles that this article, in part, looks to address—most notably, neither scholar treats the production of the volume's own edition-to-edition multiplicity. Millay's footnoted or glossed lower-class background also needs repositioning, as something very crucial to her poetic intervention and transcendence of social boundaries. For examples of these well-documented cultural factors, see CLARK 1993, which explores the dueling demands of modernist artists on the one hand, and community readers on the other hand. Clark sheds light on the paradox faced by modernist women writers: "the more successfully they wrote, both to appeal to a feminized community of readers and to help readers feel part of the literary community, the less they could be considered serious writers" (133). Also see GILBERT and GUBAR 1995.

to distinguish *A Few Figs from Thistles* either from the “more serious” poetics of other modernist writers or from imagined stages of graduation imposed onto Millay’s poetic legacy. As Schoenberg’s and Trudeau’s casting of Millay’s reception history has it, Millay’s neglect “had less to do with the value of her work than with the aesthetic of modernist criticism” (2006, 220). Furthermore, the subsequent redactions made to this volume suggest the nuance of literary strategy on the part of Millay, which would continue to mark and shape her poetic output.⁶ Ultimately perhaps, the real stake of the curious case of Millay and *A Few Figs from Thistles* is the provocation to reevaluate the organizing principles that have bestowed to us a discourse susceptible to such distortions.⁷

‘Arrested Production: What Came First, the Second April or the First Few Figs?’

The story of *A Few Figs from Thistles* begins with a publisher, though not the publisher ultimately responsible for the volume’s printing. The 1912 appearance of Millay’s poem *Renascence* (selected as one of the best one hundred poems in a literary contest and published in *The Lyric Year*) brought Millay and her poetry into contact with New York publisher Mitchell Kennerley (MILFORD 2001, 75–104). In 1913, Kennerley began publishing Millay’s poetry in his literary magazine *Forum* and, over the next three years, would feature twelve of her poems (ANDERSON 2003, 87). During this time, Kennerley also began to press Millay to let him bring out a volume. Eventually (over four years later), Millay did publish her first volume of poetry with Kennerley. *Renascence and Other Poems* appeared on December 19, 1917, and was highly praised, particularly for what was viewed as its promise and early maturity. One reviewer wrote: “Your first thought upon meeting Miss Millay is that she is much too young to have written her poetry. Her

6. See MICHAILIDOU 2004, which traces objections to Millay’s later work according to her alleged inability to attain artistic maturity, despite what he sees as Millay’s earlier attempts to expand her scope by turning to more abstract and philosophical aesthetics (121).

7. This point, in part, echoes FRAISTAT 1986, in which the author argues for the ethics of “rehistoricizing” texts. Referring to his study as “contextual poetics”, Fraistat offers a solid model for accounting for the various contexts and forms in which poems (or volumes of poetry or pieces of volumes, &c.) appear. He argues that readers and critics may sometimes discover or impose a unity on the text via their own cognitive ingenuity.

first book, 'Renaissance,' seems to have come from a life of much suffering and wide experience" (NIKSAH 1920, 6). Critical reactions such as these, expressing assumptive surprise at the gap between Millay the person and Millay the poet, from the beginning yoked Millay's poetics to a reading practice that needed to reconcile the tenor of her poetry with her identity as a (young) woman.

In addition to marking the beginning of Millay's professional literary career, the publication of this first volume provides important insight into Millay's early plans for her poetry. A few months before the printing of *Renaissance*, in a letter home to her mother, Cora B. Millay, and sister, Norma, she wrote:

I have seen the fac-simile of the title-page of my book—[. . .] It is all—the whole book—going to be printed on that beautiful, very rough, very torn-edgy paper, like my *Modern Love*—do you remember.—I said to Mitchell concerning this matter—"Won't it be terribly expensive? to print the whole book on such wonderful paper?" & he said "Oh, well,—you *promised* me, Edna, it was to be a very small book!"—and so it is—lovely & thin—only the very best—& bound in black with gold letters. Mitchell does get out the prettiest books!—It ought to sell well for Christmas presents—[. . .] (It's so funny for me to think of the business end of it—but I want it to be read—it's that more than the disgusting money—the dirty necessary money!) (MACDOUGALL 1952, 76–77)

While clearly playful here (a common tendency in Millay's letter writing throughout her life), this letter also reveals Millay's early-developed and abiding concern with the extent of her readership. From early on, the stakes included a poetically dominated presence and volumes that would circulate easily and widely; Millay imagined her poetic voice as one that could reach beyond a small coterie audience.⁸

Given the successful publication and reception of *Renaissance*, Millay had no good reason to abandon Kennerley as a publisher, despite his faulty business practices. Adding to the appeal was Kennerley's reputation for being one of the most dynamic publishing houses in New York, publishing

8. For additional counter-narratives built around the relationship between the construction of modernism and commodity culture, see Rainey, who contends that "modernism and commodity culture were not implacable enemies but fraternal rivals" (1999, 76).

poets such as Vachel Lindsay, Arthur Davison Ficke, and D. H. Lawrence. As Alfred A. Knopf remembered:

There were good publishing houses, of course . . . but it was Mitchell Kennerley who was setting another more adventurous course. [. . . Oh], the manner of his books. The way they were bound and produced. I remember them clearly, still, in their rich black cloth bindings with gold stamping. The man had extraordinary taste and certain judgment. (MILFORD 2001, 146–47)

Initially, this openness to adventure, coupled with Kennerley's belief in the "remarkable freshness, sincerity, and power" of Millay's poetry (Milford 149), kept Millay committed to Kennerley's publishing house, and, in early 1920, after finishing the proof of her second volume, she again gave the job to Kennerley.

In a letter to American writer and friend Allan Ross Macdougall, dated April 7, Millay wrote: "I sent the first page-proofs back to Mitchell Kennerley yesterday; and the book, which I call simply POEMS, ought to be out in two or three weeks" (MACDOUGALL 1952, 93). Kennerley promised to have her second volume out in May—a promise that he failed to keep. This failed promise would significantly alter Millay's planned output. While *A Few Figs from Thistles* has historically appeared as Millay's second volume of verse, the collection referred to here as "Poems" was not *A Few Figs from Thistles*. The volume that Millay hired Kennerley to bring out in April of 1920 was what we know as *Second April*; however, because of printing delays, *Second April* did not appear until 1921, the year after *A Few Figs from Thistles'* appearance. In a 1920 letter to American poet and friend Arthur Davison Ficke, Millay expressed telling expectations of what she assumed would to be her sophomore volume: "My second book of poems, *A Stalk of Fennel*, will be published this fall.⁹ There are some very good things in it,—one group especially, a group of elegies, I am anxious to have you see" (MACDOUGALL 1952, 94). Millay's concern with the elegies—a reflective and gravitas form, lamenting loss and death—hints at her understanding of this volume's tone and of its reception.¹⁰ *Spring*, the opening poem of *Second April*, contains sobering, anti-pastoral (and anti-

9. An early working title for *Second April*.

10. This group of elegies was written about Dorothy Coleman—a girl Millay knew from Vassar who died suddenly in the flu epidemic of 1918—and was printed

Victorian) lines such as, “Not only under ground are the brains of men / eaten by maggots” and “It is not enough that yearly, down this hill, / April / Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers”. The volume’s tone and content staked out poetic terrain that would have put her in more direct conversation with contemporaries such as Eliot and Williams.

However, in the spring of 1920 Kennerley’s publishing had come to a halt. In June, anxiously awaiting the appearance of *Second April*, Millay began to inquire more seriously about the printing delay:

Mitchell, dear,—

You are behaving disgracefully to il’ Edna, whom you love,—all the time her mother keeps asking her questions which it is impossible for her to answer, & it is all very awkward & horrid, & you ought to be ashamed.

Write me at once, giving me some nice, plausible, mendacious-as-hell reason why you have not yet published my pretty book. (MILFORD 2001, 186)

Kennerley failed to provide a reason. In a letter to American poet and friend Witter (Hal) Bynner, dated October 29, 1920 (seven months after she first gave proofs of *Second April* to Kennerley), Millay wrote: “My book isn’t out yet. It’s dreadful. I write Mitchell all the time, and he won’t answer my letters; and every time I call up the office they tell me he is out, and I know dam [sic] well he is so near the telephone all the time that I hear his breathing” (Macdougall 103). With no contact from Kennerley, Millay had already begun to consider her options: “I am going to see Knopf about it, I think. Although I don’t see what he could do. Maybe there’ll be a law-suit, ‘n everything. I wish I’d taken it to Knopf in the first place, as you advised me to do, Hal” (MACDOUGALL 1952, 103).

Ultimately, Kennerley’s dilatory handling of *Second April* pushed Millay to offer a collection she originally meant to be her third volume—*A Few Figs from Thistles*—to a lesser-known, avant-garde publisher. With *Second April* still in publication limbo, Millay took her manuscript for *A Few Figs from Thistles* to publisher Frank Shay, who immediately printed *A Few Figs from Thistles* in the autumn of 1920. *Second April* did not appear from Kennerley’s publishing house until the following summer, 1921.

under the general title “Memorial to D.C”. It includes the poems *Epitaph*, *Prayer to Persephone*, *Chorus*, *Dirge*, and *Elegy* (MILFORD 2001, 187).

This alteration in Millay's output has had irrefutable consequences on popular readings of Millay's work.¹¹ In part, it opened up a space for speculation that this publishing house change paralleled her creation of the prose pseudonym Nancy Boyd and thus was a deliberate attempt to separate *A Few Figs from Thistles* from her larger body of "serious" work. Furthermore, with a three year gap between her first and second collections, the truancy of *Second April* as an identifiable inheritance from the promise generated by *Renascence* made for quite a different literary stage-setting on which audiences would encounter the more bold and radical poetics of *A Few Figs from Thistles*.

An expectant reviewer wrote in 1920, just prior to the appearance of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, "Edna St. Vincent is one of our most distinctive personalities in modern American poetry. She has a new volume soon to be published which is said to be a decided advance in intensity and form over her first volume, 'Renascence'" (Anon. 3). A 1922 review in *The Times*, reassessing Millay's career after her first three collections, not only ignored *A Few Figs from Thistles* altogether, but also claimed, "Perhaps it is a pity that the impulse to write 'Renascence' came to Miss Millay at the beginning of her poetical career" (DE SELINCOURT 1922, 208). Upon describing *Renascence* as "authentic" and "arresting", as leading the reader "through dramatic and mystical vicissitudes to the visionary climax" and "[implying] of humility, of prostration, of utter solitude, [constituting] a touch of genius", the reviewer suggests "After 'Renascence,' it must have been difficult for Miss Millay to go on. [. . .] But having read 'Renascence' we shall continue to wait patiently for the reassertion and development of the spiritual vision by which it was inspired, and its faithful application to all the stirrings and striving of our modern world" (DE SELINCOURT 1922, 208). The reviewer continues:

Meantime, Miss Millay regales us with various exhibitions of remarkable technique. [. . .] Versatile, unseizable, it is more difficult to explain her than to set her to explain herself. Her sensitiveness is extreme, and she is disposed, we think, to dwell less on what life has given, than on what it has taken or may take away from her; yet she has, as 'The Bean-Stalk'

11. In the earlier quoted 7 April 1920 letter to Allan Ross Macdougall, Millay had written: "Mr. Kennerley is going to bring out my *ARIA DA CAPO* in a little book, too, this spring. And I have decided to let him have the *FIGS FROM THISTLES*, — thus confining my publishing to one publisher, which I have decided is the best thing to do" (MACDOUGALL 1952, 93).

and 'The Blue Flag in the Bog' both show, a genuine power of creative imagination, an natural eloquence which sometimes allows her to pursue the expression of what she has expressed, and a musical ear which is equally at her service whether her verse is bond or free. She rounds off both her volumes with half-a-dozen or more sonnets, not fearing and, indeed, having no reason to fear, this final test. (DE SELINCOURT 1922, 208)

While the review arrives at something like praise for *Second April*, it's difficult to ignore the reviewer's inability to recover from the perceived discrepancies between what was promised and what came after *Renascence*.

This reception rippled through the years to follow, also marking later collections. Once made available to the public, the reviewers picked up on the serious tenor found within *Second April*. Much of the response, however, seems colored by the shadow of "immaturity" cast over *A Few Figs from Thistles*. In discussion of *Second April*, the poet-critic Padraic Colum wrote in 1921: "Miss Millay is a poet with good gifts—a gift of witty expression [. . .] But she does need to be reminded of the stern intellectual discipline that the writers who matter have given themselves—the discipline that permits the poet to have ice on the brain and fire in the heart" (1921, 189–190). Another 1921 reviewer wrote: "Genius is a strong word, and one too often used, but I do not use it idly, or, I think, inaccurately in connection with Edna St Vincent Millay. It is, at present, genius in the bud. It may never come to full flower. But it has every evidence of growing life" (MAYNARD 1921, 3). Yet another wrote: "She has the poet's sight and the poet's hearing. She sees visions in nature beyond our range, and hears sounds to us inaudible. These extra powers give to many of her verses a delicate charm" (PHELPS 1921, 10). Even in the act of identifying her poetic skill, reviews such as these maintain the notion of Millay as a poet engendered by novice status, effectively suspending her in a coming-of-age stage, despite already having three volumes and additional works under her creative belt. These perceptions continue to inflect discussions about Millay's poetry today.

In addition to the overt botanical title cues linking her second and third volumes—"A Stalk of Fennel", "Young April"¹², *Second April*, *A Few Figs from Thistles*—mythological and biblical references situate these texts

12. Another working title for *Second April* that appeared in a list of works by Edna St. Vincent Millay printed in the 1920 edition of *A Few Figs from Thistles*. This working title has "(Ready Shortly)" printed below it.

within a shared discourse. Both native to the Mediterranean region, fennel and figs each figure heavily in traditional master narratives within Greek mythology and Christianity, respectively. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, angered by Prometheus' stubborn guile, Zeus decides to withhold "the power of unwearying fire" from humankind; however, Prometheus steals the gift of fire back from Olympus by concealing an ember in a hollow stalk of fennel (ATHANASSAKIS 2004, 25). "Stalk of Fennel", the working title for *Second April*, suggests that between these pages burn verses by Millay with the potential to transcend (divine) limitations and, through language, revolutionize the thinking made available to humankind. Likewise, the symbol of the fig conjures up a Christian parable with promises to expand human potential in the face of adversity. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus references figs as he delivers his lessons on prophesy:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or A Few Figs from Thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 7:15–20)

Millay's title borrows strong rhetorical suggestions from this parable to construct an ideal reading process for her poetry. This process implicates the reader's judgment and presupposes a grave need to negotiate metaphorical and ideological thorns and thistles in order to access and digest the good content. Millay likens her thin collection of poems to the good fruit from a good tree, in a sense likening her female poet-speaker to a trustworthy prophet. The image of the fig speaks to Millay's sense of this poetry's ability to nourish society—specifically the female portion—with (divine) insight toward what she conceived of as a better version of itself. These embedded associations reveal not only Millay's effective uses of traditional forms and narratives, but they also reveal the interconnectedness and continuity among these works of poetry.

In the later *Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, edited by her sister Norma and published in 1959, the selections from *Second April* precede poems from *A Few Figs from Thistles*, honoring the original literary arch Millay had in mind. In the introduction, Norma wrote, "These collections [. . .] were compiled by the poet in the early forties and could be said to embrace [. . .] her poetic works up to that time" (v). In a sense, *Second April*

was meant to prepare the literary ground for *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Lacking the dark interlude of *Second April*, *A Few Figs from Thistles* was left open to the readings that have positioned the volume as emblematic of an inconsistent and adolescent cynicism, as “light” instead of serious, as flip-pant instead of highly subversive, as immature instead of intellectually suspicious of existing social norms. In the opinion of many readers and critics, Millay could not muster the next mature theme—an opinion that would carry over into assessments of her later collections. For example, a reviewer in 1923 writes: “Edna St. Vincent Millay has escaped somewhat from her mood of brittle cynicism. In ‘The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems’ we come on lyrics that are both sturdier and surer than some earlier performances. Her mood is still that of a woman who loves both lightly and deeply and is a trifle ironical about it all” (J. F. 1923, 4). The dismissive reading (which continues to impact readers and scholars today) had the effect of deflecting and diminishing critical responses to the challenges to conservative notions of domesticity, gender, and sexuality present throughout Millay’s oeuvre.

‘Threads of Indeterminacy: Millay’s Early Poetry’

While the complicated print production of Millay’s first three volumes sheds some light on the strange reception history of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, the material record of this volume’s construction does even more to debunk teleological narratives often read back onto Millay’s writing career. Indeed, notes for both *Second April* and *A Few Figs from Thistles* and early correspondence reveal a strong and extended interconnectedness between Millay’s poetic works. Rather than unveil a volume-to-volume story of progress in regard to Millay’s poetic sophistication and sensibilities, archival materials speak to a more singular moment that produced a poetic voice spanning Millay’s career. Even the more critically celebrated poetry of *The Harp-Weaver*—the volume most responsible for winning Millay the Pulitzer—seems to have been born alongside the poems that today make up *Second April* and *A Few Figs from Thistles*. This is not to suggest that something like development never occurred in Millay’s work, or that such aesthetic continuities do not exist to some extent for all poetry. But, in light of the critical labels used to inform readings of Millay’s oeuvre, this record calls into serious question methodologies or discourses founded too much on the attractiveness of the narratives of progress and maturation.

The final pages of an unpublished notebook used between the years 1918 and 1920 contain a handwritten list of poems under the heading “2nd, Volume” (MILLAY 1918–1920). While this working table of contents arguably belongs to what would become *Second April*, the list does less to create distinctions and more to blur the boundaries between Millay’s poetic works. In addition to poem titles such as *Death of Autumn* and *Elaine*, which appear in *Second April*, this list also includes the titles *Thursday*, *She’s Overheard Singing*, *The Unexplorer*, and *Daphne*—poems that appear in the 1920 edition of *A Few Figs from Thistles*—and the titles *Domestic as a Plate* (a working title for the poem *Grown-Up*) and *Recuerdo*—poems that Millay included in the 1921 and 1922 editions of *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Also found within this early notebook entry are titles such as *Departure*, *Visit to the Asylum*, *Humoresque* and *The Pond*—poems from Millay’s even later 1922 volume *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*. This nascent listing of poem titles argues directly against the differentiations and critical chronologies used by critics to bolster developmental and qualitative distinctions between Millay’s volumes.

While the early manuscript evidence shows that nearly inseparable aesthetic intricacies and thematic ties abound in her body of work, even close friends and the readers that Millay included in her construction process tried to make distinctions for her; however, ultimately, the record of these “collaborations”, like the manuscripts, do more blurring than deciding. Even Millay herself was questioning the content and structures for the textual containers that the public would receive, and she looked for outside input to help her sort the wheat from the chaff. Millay sent an inclusive manuscript of her second volume for Bynner (and Ficke) to review. In addition to providing praise and his commentary for poems within this large manuscript, Bynner also made his suggestions for omissions and inclusions in an unpublished portion of a letter dated September 10, 1920:¹³

For what they are worth, even though print may have vetoed their possible practical usefulness, I append some notes I made on the mss. you sent me. [. . .] I would omit *Distingué*, *The Socialist*, *To a Poet that Died Young*, *Pastoral*, *Assault*, *To Kathleen*, *To E.W.M.K.*, *To a Lady in a Position of Influence*, *To All Magnificent Ladies* [. . .], *To Poison Ivy*, *Thursday*, *A Reflection*, *Q.E.D.*, *The Unbeliever*, *Humoresque*, *The New*

13. For the published portions of this letter, see KRAFT 1981, 76–78.

Fancy, “I know I said, ‘I am weary of you; go’”, Journey, and The Blue Flag in the Bog. [. . .] I forgot to add that I would omit all of Rosemary . . . and all of Alms . . . and, I think, all of The Little Hill. [. . .] Ode to Silence, full of beauties, is yet troubling like Francis Thompson. And I am not keen for the following: The Bean-Stalk (in spite of Harriet), The Philosopher, The Cheerful Abstainer, Grown-Up (on account of Stevenson) and The Wild Swans.

Objections being over, I lie at your feet again and always. I have sung Recuerdo back and forth on San Francisco Bay (and not I alone), I feel my back creep with the beauty of The Death of Autumn. I marvel at the dexterities of Travel, Passer Mortuus Est, Two Slatterns and a King, The Pond, The Singin’ Woman, The Penitent, She is Overheard Singing, First Fig, Second Fig and Daphne. I am moved by Inland, Burial, Eel-Grass, Song of a Second April, Lament, Portrait by a Neighbor and To a Certain Rich Man. And I am awed to the quick by the Twenty Sonnets. And the beauty of it all, of you, of your poetry, is an integral part of my deepest happiness, the happiness that neither comes nor goes but is. (BYNNER 1920)

Similar to Millay’s notebook, Bynner here discusses poems that span a larger portion of Millay’s poetic career—*Second April*, all three iterations of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, and *The Harp-Weaver*. What’s more, Millay’s counter response to Bynner’s suggestions only further foils attempts at making any volume-to-volume distinctions. In October of 1920, she wrote back:

A great deal of what Arthur wrote on the margins of the Ode to Silence is perfectly true. But it’s too late to change it now. You see, I can’t get in touch with Mitchell. And when he gets ready to print it, he’ll go ahead and print it, without consulting me at all. However, the most of those poems you advised me to leave out, Hal, were not going into the book anyway. I just happened to send them along. Many of them will be collected, eventually, into the volume I am going to call *A Few Figs from Thistles*. (MACDOUGALL 1952, 103–104)

Although Millay expressed an understandable doubt concerning her ability to make changes to *Second April*, and despite her claim that what Hal had advised to leave out was in fact intended to become its own separate collection, this correspondence only further complicates the pedigrees of these volumes, as changes were made—neither Bynner’s suggested in-list nor his out-list coincides with the content of *Second April* or *A Few Figs*

from *Thistles*. Titles from these lists appear across multiple volumes as we have them today. This discussion of the not-yet-distinct volumes further collapses critical distinctions and resists suggestions that the poetic voices found from volume to volume are necessarily markers of Millay's teleology as a poet.

'Engendering a "New" Woman: Class/Gender Mobility'

Although marked and somewhat limited by an absent consideration of *A Few Figs from Thistles*' production history, an understanding of Millay's importance in shaping the New Woman according to modern concerns and nuance has gained critical traction. As Miller rehearses it:

Insofar as her poems negotiated the imperatives of her authorial position, their principal task was the management of a public, unconventional, female sexuality—one capable of reflecting the self-image of a national as well as a bohemian readership. In this capacity Millay was most New Woman: on the one hand representing a concrete and accessible modernity in the sexuality her poems expressed; on the other hand, in her lyricism, her traditional forms, and even in her poetry as such, representing the rejection of the ordinary mainstream world—including its fetishization of modernity. As the symbol of Free Love, she had to balance male prerogative and conventional femininity as well as control the meaning of her own universal desirability. The circulation that set such desire in motion—as represented in her poems and enacted in the buying and selling of her books—made her acutely vulnerable to denigration as a woman. [. . .] Millay tackled the intricacies of her predicament partly through a synthesis of female sexuality and the typically bohemian poetics of economy. (1999, 30–31)

The relationship between her social engagement and her aesthetics has been studied; however, despite its coverage in her biography, the role that a lower-class background played in developing Millay's outlook remains largely footnoted or glossed over, portraying a spontaneous bohemian sensibility basically divorced from material conditions.

Although often read and discussed according to her activity in bourgeois circles, Millay had a working class background and was highly aware of her precarious financial situation at the emergence of her literary career. Not only do images of labor—maids, milk men, &c.—populate

Millay's early work, but her gendered mastery of inside/outside manipulation also reflects her financially sponsored transition from an underprivileged experience of Vermont to a privileged experience of New York. This class-ranging experience arguably influenced Millay's sensitivity to social pressures and also her investment in crafting a gendered and mobile idiom of the New Woman.

The original edition of *A Few Figs from Thistles* begins with the group of poems commonly referred to as "A Few Figs".¹⁴ This set establishes the book's idiom of the New Woman. The poems in this short series debunk a conservative economy of time and work to celebrate counter-cultural women's values and outlooks that have been traditionally coded as male terrain (in this case, living in the present at the expense of past or future concerns). Initiating things is one of Millay's most quoted poems and memorable images—the candle that "burns at both ends"—as *First Fig* recodes the impracticality of forgoing past/future concerns as the pleasurable and powerful embracement of immediacy. In other words, the threat of an unsustainable temporality becomes subordinate to the potency of experience. As Girard puts it,

Even her most seemingly flippant, "light" verse participates in this mode of lyric experimentation. . . [*First Fig*] has typically been read as an emblem of the bohemian ethos that dominated Greenwich Village in the late teens and early twenties. While this is undoubtedly true, the poem. . . also performs an important meta-poetic function. As we are dazzled by that brilliant, double-burning candle—a powerful metaphor for Millay's body—the speaker addresses us directly, "Ah, my foes, and oh, my friends", and commands us to watch: "It gives a lovely light!" We are positioned explicitly as voyeurs rather than readers, by a coy speaker who seems to revel in that objectification. . . This power dynamic, in which a visually arresting speaker captivates her audience and manipulates our desire to watch and follow, develops across Millay's poetry into a formal aesthetic logic. (2012, 113)

Indeed, throughout *A Few Figs from Thistles*, we see challenge after challenge to societal expectations, especially those expectations routed in a

14. This grouping contains five poems—*First Fig*, *Second Fig*, *The Unexplorer*, *Thursday*, and *The Penitent*—and was labeled "A Few Figs" when printed in the June 1918 issue of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

class and gender performance that asks women to exhibit and (re)produce the kind of permanence that is both passive and compliant.

In *The Merry Maid*, for instance, we encounter a maid who, rather than weep or mourn over love-lost, celebrates her heartbreak for inciting a new, liberated perspective on domestic relations. More specifically, this sudden outlook allows the maid claim to a liberating account of love's fleeting nature and promise, freeing her from the traditional burden of a monogamous investment in romance:

Oh, I am grown so free from care
Since my heart broke!
I set my throat against the air,
I laugh at simple folk! (MILLAY 1920, 11)

Instead of exhibiting the victimized or uncontrolled reaction perhaps expected of a female figure featured in a story of love-lost, this working class speaker inherits what has traditionally been a male-oriented framework to the end of a relationship: sexual freedom!

In *Daphne*, the poem that ends this text's original idiomatic sweep of female liberation, we witness the force of female independence and indeterminacy taken to the level of myth, as Millay conjures Apollo, the god of verse, imbuing the text with a divine rhetorical force. What's more, this poem gives this myth's moment of transformation a feminist bend. The poem's female speaker proclaims:

Why do you follow me?—
Any moment I can be
Nothing but a laurel-tree. (MILLAY 1920, 14)

In Ovid's version, the nymph Daphne turns into a laurel tree (the leaf of which, in addition to being a common cooking herb, is both the symbol of the unattainable and the object used to adorn the prosperous). After an act of desperate pleading to her divine father for salvation from Apollo's pursuit, her feet turn numb and cold and fasten to the ground, bark grows around her body, her hair turns into leaves, her arms into boughs, and only the smoothness of her skin remains, which Apollo still touches after her transformation (DRYDEN, et al. 1844, 34–37). In Millay's version, however, rather than remain the tragic tale of Daphne's despairing attempt to maintain her virginity by turning into the static image of an unattainable (yet consumable) laurel tree, the female speaker of this poem instead har-

nesses changeability as an active means of power and, more importantly, of mobility. In a final act of defiance, the challenge that this volume has been enacting comes to fruition, outmaneuvering even the gods:

Yet if over hill and hollow
 Still it is your will to follow,
 I am off;—to heel, Apollo! (MILLAY 1920, 14)

Although labeling the poem “light”, Keyser also considers *Daphne* exemplary of Millay’s “depictions of modern women’s virtuosic self-transformations” (2011, 36):

While Millay depicts this transformation in mythological terms, the poem implies that the modern woman can outpace her male competitors in performing multiple versions of the self. Women can extend, when needed, the ‘pink bough’ of blossoming femininity. Self-transformation in Millay’s imagining is neither tragic nor terrifying, but rather playful, strategic, and even triumphant. (2011, 40)

Concluding with *Daphne*, then, the arc of the original edition of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, from the language of ephemeral beginning to the language of ethereal end, radically undermines traditional notions of class/domestic roles, gender performances, and sexual norms. As such, Millay’s early poetry activated the kind of female autonomy that laid groundwork for feminist interventions enacted by the New Woman.

‘Within Yet Against: Millay’s Redacted Modes of Resistance’

In spite of its intense feminist gestures and its interconnectedness with her poetic oeuvre, critics (both then and now) have created a delimiting lens of immaturity and apprenticeship around the original appearance of Millay’s *A Few Figs from Thistles*. The effects of this critical consideration can be seen in the subsequent 1921 and 1922 editions of the volume, which display revisionary and creative reactions to this reception. What’s more, these follow-up textual moments offer a nuanced understanding of what Artimis Michailidou has recognized as Millay’s role “in the formation of the younger woman’s artistic social consciousness, providing her with the necessary tools to articulate frustration, victimization, and enclosure,

[as Millay] turned frustration and domestic enclosure into new subjects for women's writing" (2004, 68). Indeed, the two revised editions—with a total addition of eight poems and drastic changes to the bibliographic presentation—produce distinct changes that, without yielding, ultimately alter how Millay's idiom of the New Woman functioned.

These alterations demonstrate Millay's concerted efforts to negotiate gendered resistances to her text in order to redeploy the subversive messages present within its pages. Millay's first "revision" of *A Few Figs from Thistles* was printed in 1921 and included four new poems: *To S.M.*, *The Singing Woman from the Wood's Edge*, *Grown-Up*, and *The Prisoner*. Two things are immediately striking about these additions. First, they introduce themes that do not appear in the 1920 edition—loss and defeat—drastically shifting the tone of this volume. Especially surprising is the addition of the poems *Grown-Up* and *The Prisoner*, as they each evince anxieties about losing control and questions of identity that don't exist in the first edition. In the 1920 edition, at most, poems such as *The Penitent* feigned an uncertainty that is soon countered by an even stronger realization of the new female identity. Moreover, while the speaker in the original edition spent time in the domestic space, she did so explicitly on her own terms—she maintained a level of separation—and no force could seem to confine her to predetermined domestic roles. However, the poems added in the 1921 edition present a female speaker "domestic as a plate" and "locked into" a name, generating a more serious consideration of the risks to women associated with the domestic space. These introductions create tension with the language of resolute confidence governing the ideas and actions of the original female speaker, perhaps injecting doses of susceptibility and risk that reflect the existing pressure of social norms.

In addition to these tonal shifts, the placement of two other poems results in thematic and kinetic disruptions to the order of the collection, in particular the beginning and ending experience produced by the original moment of *A Few Figs from Thistles*.¹⁵ The early appearance of the elegy *To S.M.* after the poem *Thursday* interrupts the grouping known as "A Few Figs", which originally opened the volume. The elegiac stance of *To S.M.* creates tension with this grouping's radical dismissal of past and future consequence, as the speaker's grief over death and her resistance to change trouble the once unwavering tribute to all things ephemeral.

15. The four-poem sonnet sequence that ends *Figs from Thistles*, beside minor adjustment in the bibliographic coding (i.e. the inclusion or exclusion of the group title "Sonnets"), stays consistent across each edition.

The 1921 revision to the two closing poems similarly troubles the rhetorical momentum generated in the original language. As mentioned earlier, the 1920 edition ended with the poem *To the Not Impossible Him*—which features a speaker who denounces the domestic and romantic demands for permanence in favor of the power and contingency of mobility—and the culminating poem *Daphne*—which takes the female speaker’s subversion of gendered norms to the mythical level. The 1921 edition, however, ends with the short poems *Grown-Up* and *The Prisoner*, each featuring a speaker constrained and affected by the demands of domesticity, capping the original’s final tones of defiance, independence, and precocious changeability. Ending with such unsettled female figures that are marked by the pressures of social norms severely alters the volume’s idiomatic sweep of female liberation.

The second “revision” of *A Few Figs from Thistles* appeared in 1922 and introduced four more poems: *Recuerdo*, *MacDougal Street*, *Midnight Oil*, and *To Kathleen*.¹⁶ These new poems—which again introduce counter-themes of limitation and stagnation—were coupled with a drastic reordering, even further augmenting the volume’s feminist embracement of the ephemeral and further fragmenting the liberatory momentum generated by its language.

Recuerdo constructs a bohemian imperative linked to a refrain—an imperative, then, that arguably and paradoxically subscribes to the rigidity of cycles and structures:

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry. (MILLAY 1922, 10–11)

While there are instances of spontaneity in this poem (suddenly purchasing a dozen each of apples and pears, greeting a stranger, buying the morning paper without intending to read it, and giving away the apples and pears), the repetition of these lines (in addition to being trivial) frames this spontaneity within (if also against) the safety and predictability of poetic pattern, smuggling in an elements of stasis and tradition. Certain scholarly conversations about Millay’s early poems celebrate these pieces as being more harmonious with the original rhetorical tone of the *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Miller, for example, reads a back-and-forth between romantic plenty and economic scarcity within *Recuerdo* as an idyllic and successful

16. *Recuerdo* was first published in *Poetry* in 1919, as additional evidence against an easily parsed narrative of Millay’s creative output or aesthetic periodicity during the 1920s.

synthesis of bohemian ideals (1999, 31–32). Girard's reflections on Millay's bohemianism also gesture at her ability to add philosophical and aesthetic depth to seemingly “flippant” poems like *Recuerdo*. When considering the poem's later addition and its relationship to the text's initial form, however, *Recuerdo* also has divergent registers. More specifically, Spanish for “memory” and “I remember”, this poem endorses a counter-intuitive investment in the past, creating a structure of repeatability around an experience that otherwise prides itself on impulse and contingency. The poem's placement compounds this tension, as it comes directly after the pair *First Fig* and *Second Fig*—poems that remain loyal to the present moment at all costs—heightening the ideological and rhetorical feedback that *Recuerdo* produces in relation to the volume's ordinary radical and feminist language of defiance.

Macdougall Street further develops the encroachment of value systems that appear informed by dominant culture. Like *Recuerdo*, Miller reads *MacDougall Street* along advantageous lines, with a speaker who, despite her loss of control and reduction to waiting for a male-driven attention, is ultimately saved by her bohemian aesthetic sensibility (1999, 33–34). In particular, this poem challenges the thing seemingly held most dear in the volume: female autonomy. Indeed, it portrays a shy and uncertain female figure that constructs and assesses worth in relation to a male presence:

As I went up and down to take the evening air,
 (Sweet to meet upon the street, why must I be so shy?)

I saw him lay his hand upon her torn black hair;
 (“Little dirty Latin child, let the lady by!”)

[. . .]

He walked like a king through the filth and the clutter,
 (Sweet to meet upon the street, why did you glance me by?)

But he caught the quaint Italian quip she flung him from the gutter;
 (What can there be to cry about that I should lie and cry?)

He laid his darling hand upon her little black head,
 (I wish I were a ragged child with ear-rings in my ears!)

And he said she was a baggage to have said what she had said;
 (Truly I shall be ill unless I stop these tears!) (MILLAY 1922, 14–15)

This poem conflicts directly with the absolutist brand of agency and positionality enforced throughout the original edition. Here, we have a speaker who, rather than set herself apart from gendered expectations, goes so far

as to subordinate herself to a male figure, seeking value in his recognition. Furthermore, we have the introduction of an explicit female-against-female competition created by the speaker's desire to garner attention from the male figure of the poem. The female speaker shifts from degrading to envying the young girl according to the girl's proximity to this male figure. Also, the fact that he "glances her by" potentially places her on the same level with the filth and clutter he walks through "like a king". By the end, the female speaker is nearly undone, both emotionally and physically, by her longing to be desired by this man. The placement of *Macdougall Street* underscores the disparity between this newly introduced female figure and the type of feminine figure we observe throughout the original edition. The poem appears right after *To The Not Impossible Him*—a poem in which conventional ideas of male-female relations fall apart, and the poem all but promises an eventual change of heart on the part of the female speaker. Placing *Macdougall Street* after *To The Not Impossible Him* and changing the follow-up of *Daphne* further complicates the original brand of independence, frustrating the confidence and certainty of maintaining a purely and subversively liberated female position in the volume's world.

Not all additions to the volume work to merely create rhetorical tensions or complications for the idiom. There are new poems in the 1922 edition that maintain or extend the original themes. *Midnight Oil*, for example, performs a defiance of sleep:

Cut if you will, with Sleep's dull knife,
 Each day to half its length, my friend, —
 The years the Time takes of my life,
 He'll take from off the other end! (MILLAY 1922, 30)

In accordance with the bohemian tradition, the speaker here denounces sleep for its banality, preferring an early death to a conservative good night's rest. This paradigm echoes the embracement of temporality valorized in the grouping "A Few Figs". Also the poem *To Kathleen* does interesting things with male gendering of the poet-speaker, challenging or bending reader expectations. This poem also, in part, wants to interrogate notions about poetry itself: besides the somber tenor of the poem, the creativity that goes into poetry comes under suspicion. Writing has become something static, cold, and inhospitable.

Collectively, the changes made to *A Few Figs from Thistles* work to temper the deployment of the volume's subversive idiom of the New Woman, as radical poems become more spread out, with *Daphne*, the climactic poem of

feminine sovereignty and defiant transcendence of gendered performances, buried in the middle. Rather than build a romanticized story of maturation, however, these revisions—coupled with the complicated textual history of this volume's production and reception—elucidate the gendered forces that women writers have pushed against, then and now.

* * * *

The critical trajectories and readings of *A Few Figs from Thistles*, as well as Millay's larger oeuvre, expose the reality for subversive women writers that must navigate (and re-navigate) the nexus of material and social circumstance impacting the literary scene. I do not want to suggest, however, that these changes are merely Millay's submission to influence. As Miriam Gurko wrote in her biography, *Restless Spirit*:

One of [Millay's] deepest convictions was that she must never deviate from the truth as she saw it and as she felt impelled to write it. She refused to make any concessions in order to placate or curry favor with another person, even someone who had done as much for her as Caroline Dow. She once wrote a poem containing the line, "A bucket of blood in my path". Floyd Dell and Arthur Ficke did not like the line and Arthur told her so. She replied: "I had rather give up a bucket of your blood, Arthur, than this bucket of blood". (1962, 126)

While changes arguably altered the contours and the delivery of Millay's idiom of the New Woman, each iteration of *A Few Figs from Thistles* maintained her loyalty to the make-up of the text's original intervention. All poems remain intact though redistributed. Rather than remain the equivalent of a mystical figure imagining herself above all reality of consequence, the increasingly complicated and adaptable presentation of the idiom demonstrated in later editions suggests a poetic consciousness that understands the intricate nature of identity politics and social revolution. Death and time enter these editions, as does the realization that, perhaps, mere declarations may not lead to radical change. Ultimately, these redactions act as another example of Millay working within and yet against existing poetics and ideologies—even her own—in order to (re)expose serious issues of class, domesticity, gender norms, and sexual deviance to a wider audience.

An underlying irony of this project has been its own strange reliance on narrating suspicions of critical inquiries and methodologies too couched in the attractiveness of linearity. However, rather than outlaw "progress" as

an organizing principle for criticism, the historical production of this volume should draw important attention to the difficulty of recuperative and interpretive acts. Reclaiming this book as “light verse”—verse separate from that of an imagined version of a more serious and politically active Millay—is to create artificial distinctions and, consequently, to undermine this text’s cultural value in service of the development narratives commonly found in critical scholarship. With a new handle on this pivotal volume’s complicated material and social make-up and an approach to its reiterations informed by something other than teleological progress, perhaps we can perform even more productive re-visitations to Millay’s work.

Although regularly referred to as a “fruit”, the fig is actually an inflorescence (an inside-out flower of the tree)—the flowers and the seed grow together to form a single mass, with the non-visible flower blooming inside (FLAISHMAN, RODOV, and STOVER 2008). Like the fig of its title, we have long consumed the rhetoric and identity constructed within *A Few Figs from Thistles* without a fuller understanding of the text’s unique construction. Like the fig, Millay’s display of the New Woman has maintained a level of opacity, staying loyal to the impenetrability of her process for producing new structures of care and new forms of femininity—all while refusing to give up a bloom.

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