

The New Penelopean Poetics: A Feminist Reassessment of the Victimization of Women in Edna St. Vincent Millay's "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" and "An Ancient Gesture"

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Abstract

The Greeks have a certain authority, for they are the source of the Western traditions of poetry, philosophy, and science. The figure of Penelope in the Homeric epic can be seen as a symbol not only for woman's trials in general but also for the trials of the woman artist in a man's world. This study explores the penelopean myth as ideological tool of patriarchal system and it argues that gender stereotypes set in Greek myths have been recreated later by the modern American poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Encouraged by the feminist movement, Millay revised and rewrote the penelopean myth highlighting the gender stereotyping as an important feature in her poems, "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," and "An Ancient Gesture."

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I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest.

Millay's "I Being Born a Woman and Distressed," (from The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver, 1923).

1.1. Introduction:

Feminist theory suggests that there is something fundamentally unique about the victimization that predominantly affects women. women are victims of the patriarchal society. Certainly, change in time has lifted the social constraints of women, but it is ultimately the woman's reaction to such barriers that determines if she will conquer or be conquered by it. Feminist criticism identifies and celebrates the ways

in which women resist patriarchal structures, how they manipulate their oppressed positions to gain what they want and claim a voice with which to articulate their own concerns under conditions of domination.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) served as a living symbol of a woman who could live, think, and love as freely as she chose. Her fine balance of the emotional and the intellectual, her capacity for ecstasy in its true Greek sense of standing outside the self, and her conviction that women should be free to love and feel deeply are best exhibited in her poems. Her convictions made her the symbolic woman of her era, the 1920s, a living symbol of freedom and spontaneous joy, to the extent that the Times considered her a feminine Percy Bysshe Shelley. Millay was regarded as a leading American feminist. In 1923 she was honored the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, publishing "The Harp-Weaver."¹ In her late poetry, Millay expanded her social consciousness to include a concern with women's victimization by male-dominated culture as can be seen in her representative poem, "An Ancient Gesture." Both poems present the issue of the new Penelopean poetics which is the direct outcome of modern feminism that found its true reflection in the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. She saw the myth of Penelope in a modern context to focus the controversial state of male/female relationship.

"The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver":

"The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" speaks out for the independence of women; woman speaks, revealing an inner life in great contrast to outward appearances which dramatized the feminist independence, and the superior woman's exasperation at being humiliated.² It is an excellent place to look at Millay not only as an important sonneteer and lyricist, but also as a poet with modern appeal and subject matter that obviously asserts a feminist philosophy. Men proclaim this philosophy and practice it for centuries, but it is a revolution when a woman proclaims it. The philosophy of the poem typifies a woman who refuses to obey society's dictates. The personae of Millay's poems are like her independent spirit. Whether she resists a new style in poetry or philosophy, or insisting on her own life-style, Millay remains an individualist until she dies.³ By 1923, when this collection appeared, Millay was one of the celebrated literary personalities in America. She was not only a woman of insight, as all poets must be, but also of experience. She, by the age of thirty-one, led a life of personal freedom generally reserved only for men in her society. The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems presents this new viewpoint to literature, the liberated woman's view.⁴

The title poem is “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” which is dedicated by Millay “To My Mother,” and “How the sacrificing mother haunts her.” The poem is the title piece of Millay’s Pulitzer Prize winning book of poetry, *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* (1923).⁵ “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver,” which appears to be a simple poem, is a narrative ballad that can be interpreted as a moving demonstration to a mother’s unconditional love that often recorded as a Christmas carol. The Penelopean myth is a fit vehicle to convey women’s deepest feelings of woman’s victimization. Through it, Millay imaginatively reacts against boundaries..It emulates how easily women and mothers are dismissed and ignored. The traditional ballad form allows Millay to “enter an old text from a new critical direction,”⁶ which helps to redefine woman’s status within literary tradition.⁷ Through this act, Millay refuses to remain a part of this self-destructive society.

“The Ballad of The Harp Weaver” is a portrait of a starving weaver and her young son; it reflects the essence of a mother’s unselfish love combined with a threadworker’s magic. The poem tells how an impoverished widow magically weaves a beautiful suit of clothes for her son on her harp. The little boy cannot go outside because he does not have clothing to keep him warm. He laments for what he is missing outside his home. This action takes place on Christmas Eve, in an extremely cold night, they burn the last of the furniture for fuel and fall asleep in the cold house. In the middle of the night, the boy awakes to see his mother playing the harp and singing. As her fingers move among the harp-sitting, she seems to be weaving cloth that form rich, warm clothes just his size. He falls asleep again to the sound of her voice; when he awakes in the morning, she has frozen to death, but beside her is an enormous pile of beautiful clothing for him:⁸

There is nothing in the house,
To make a boy breaches,
Nor shears to cut cloth with,
Nor thread to take stitches.

(5-8)

The central relationship between the mother and her son is portrayed in a complex and contradicted ways. The boy’s age is never given explicitly and the textual indications are very considerable: at one point he is knee-high, and at another, “great boy” whose long legs dangle to the floor when he sits in his mother’s lap in rocking chair:⁹

And, oh, but we were silly
For half and hour or more,
Me with my long legs,

Dragging on the floor

(42-45)

Millay does not write of the mother's sacrifices because the son is sightless to them. He thinks nothing of her gifts, because to him she has no choice but to provide for him.¹⁰ The harp is financially worthless, and its only attribute is its woman's head. By using these details, Millay implies that the boy believes the harp is worthless because of its womanly qualities. But the last thing the woman arrives at is the harp when she dies with "her hands in the harp strings"(121). Harps symbolize heroic sacrifice that is grounded in an accurate depiction of one form of traditional "woman-work," as well as the more actually privileged high art of music. The son in no way questions why there is a harp in their home, and the only details of the harp are that his mother told him:¹¹

"there is nothing in the house,
But a loaf-end of rye
And a harp with a women's head
Nobody will buy"
And she began to cry.

(9-13)

Accordingly, the instrument is clearly significant to her. The woman yearns to play the harp, but motherhood leaves her little time for hobbies. Motherhood transforms her harp into a loom. Weaving replaces music, and Millay writes about the weaving with an influential song:

Her thin fingers, moving
In the thin, tall string,
Were weav-weav-weaving
Wonderful things.

(80-83)

Millay's deliberate use of the combination of harps and weaving is rooted in the instrument's rich and historical ties to women. The original conception of weaving is a primarily female form of creativity. Weaving is often associated with singing due to the physical similarities of Greek looms and Greek lyres. Classic writers sometimes refer to the image of weaving upon strings. "The process of making song was . . . a craft to be learned, through which the poet could create a tapestry of words woven together in a controlled design."¹² The allegorical content of the poem is that the family, though poor in the worldly things, is rich in love. The miracle is that the mother finds a way to convert tenor to vehicle, to make the affluence of her love for the boy into tangible beauty and wealth. The mother is the only source that brings warmth and contentment to the house. She is the one who sacrifices herself to bring salvation for her son

and the “light” makes a saint out of her, a spiritual reference that salvation can be in another world as well as here by the mother’s sacrifice:¹³

(72-75)

(60-64)

When approaching “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” as a Penelopean feminist revision, one must wonder why a mother’s love must result in death. The mother in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” ultimately sacrifices her life to clothe her son. Clothing is a symbol of the mother’s love. It physically warms and protects her son in a way that her emotions cannot. The mother’s only worries throughout the poem are directed toward her son. Selflessly, she is not concerned by having “not a rag” (4) for herself. She distracts him with the sweet lullaby of “a mother-geese rhyme” when she cannot give him what he needs:¹⁶

A rock-rockrocking
A mother-goose rhyme
O, but we were happy

For half an hour's time

(43-46)

The son identifies the clothing his mother weaved as being for “a king's son” (99 , 125) two times during the poem. Though his father is dead and absent from the poem, the son still chooses to be identified with a father-figure. “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” appears to be Millay's opposition to what Adrienne Rich describes as being the Oedipus complex's fundamental assumption, in accord with Lisa Myers notion of “Silverman's negative Oedipus complex.”¹⁷ “The two-person mother-child relationship” is by nature regressive, spherical, unproductive, and that culture depends on the son-father relationship.¹⁸

Generally, “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” is Millay's objection against the traditional role of women in society. Millay uses a harp image throughout the poem in order to remind the reader of the woman's choice and the things that she is forced to leave behind for motherhood.¹⁹ Millay does not mention the mother's sacrifices because the son is blind to them. He thinks nothing of her gifts. But the mother does not object or rather the son hears no objection from her. The son never thanks his mother for “the clothes of a king's son” (125). He is his mother's prince and his clothing (or her love) is his normal born right. The son is “cocked” and arrogant, thinking his gender makes him worthy of a royal role.

As a poet, Millay St. Vincent Millay worked out of a large conception of women's place in American culture, women's oppression under patriarchy and the dynamics of male-female relations.²⁰ Unlike some of the less feminist but more acute poets, she begins to acknowledge the existence of the unconscious and confirm the possibility that a deeper analysis of the psyche can be valuable. She writes of living with pain, aging, the approach of death; even praises the formal constraints of poetry.²¹ Before she can reach this conclusion, however, Millay must address her former devotion to the immediacy of physical experience.²²

1.2. “An Ancient Gesture”

“An Ancient Gesture” is one of Millay's last poems, appearing in print after her death in *Mine the Harvest* (1954). Significantly, the poem uses the myth of Penelope and Ulysses to explore the relationship between men and women, and the loneliness and grief that women suffer. The poem, spoken by a housewife in Millay's era, offers a rumination on Penelope's tears at her husband's absence, in ways the tears of all women, and then compares and contrasts them to the tears of men, as from the person of Ulysses. The poem has been anthologized in recent years for its feminist theme and skilled lyric aura of grief.²³

In the first stanza, “An Ancient Gesture” introduces the first person speaker of the poem who appears to be a housewife wiping her eyes on her apron as she sheds tears. The speaker compares herself to the classical heroine, Penelope, the faithful wife of the Trojan Wars hero Ulysses. The speaker appears to be an ordinary woman in the first line, but her grief feels extraordinary, especially in that she links it to something deep and ancient, to Penelope’s grief. The apron is a homely touch that connects Homer’s epic to the everyday present world. In “Penelope did this too,” Millay brings an image of the Spartan woman looking out across the Mediterranean scanning the horizon for the ship that would carry her husband back to her, worrying about whether he was even yet alive, and what is more, was he remaining as faithful to her as she was to him, and wiping her pining tears with a piece of fabric War. Millay connects this mythical figure with the modern woman quickly and dramatically, stating simply:²⁴

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my
apron:

Penelope did this too.

And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day

And undoing it all through the night;

Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets
tight;

And along towards morning, when you think it will
never be light,

And your husband has been gone, and you don't know
where, for years.

Suddenly you burst into tears;

There is simply nothing else to do.

(1-9)

With her husband absent from her life for the past twenty years and his whereabouts unknown, Penelope remains, long-sufferingly awaiting Odysseus’ return. After such an extended time, Penelope is allowed to remarry; yet, she is determined to wait for her husband even though there is little hope of his return. Due to her endurance and loyalty, Penelope remains devoted to her marriage and family, however she is not without temptation. Alternatively, when Odysseus stayed at Calypso’s Island, he had multiple encounters with Circe when he stayed at her island for a year’s time. Millay highlights the heroic qualities of Penelope’s grief and faithfulness, and places her as the primary character.²⁵

“An Ancient Gesture” points out the great gulf between Penelope’s world and Ulysses’. She gives everything she has with sincerity, while he

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acts his part, manipulating his way to fame. Penelope had really wept in worry and fear, faithfully waiting twenty years for her husband to return. The poem contrasts Penelope's authentic emotion with Ulysses' gesture of emotion. The authentic feminine gesture went upraised while Ulysses' appropriation granted him power. In this way Millay invites her readers to re-evaluate the more passive nature of Penelope's heroism as a proactive quality and not to view the gesture of crying as a weakness or breakdown, but instead an important aspect of the human condition which has lasted for millennia.²⁶ Millay further explains that crying is respectable because after all, the ancient Greeks, too, cried. If they authorize the gesture, it should be nothing to be ashamed of. Greeks cry, men cry, and a hero cries. The woman's leaping thoughts about the tears she is shedding show a certain mental agility. In a matter of moments, she weeps and then begins to recover with a reflection about the significance of the gesture:

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the
corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too
moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope...
Penelope, who really cried.

(10-17)

The last stanza implies that Penelope underwent the greater hardship and her endurance and heroism, though unsung, were thus greater than her husband's. Penelope, and women in general, are hidden leaders who illustrate the indomitable human spirit as much as men do. Millay signals her intention of speaking about more than an emotional state, and how powerful an emotion it might be. The title itself provides a kind of gesture, indicating to the reader that the topic will be not the tears themselves but the act of wiping them away. Millay emphasizes the importance and positive value of the gesture as a pure act arising out of social and cultural traditions. It is "authentic, antique,/ In the very best tradition, classic, Greek." By revealing that her speaker's gesture is "in the very best tradition," Millay overlooks the restrictions of the female gender and that should be liberated by the development of feminism. This role reversal is revealed in the second stanza when the speaker contrasts the tears of husband and wife. Penelope's tears are shed in

secret, for she has to be strong in public. Ulysses uses his tears before an audience to create an effect.²⁷

Jane Stanbrough's reading of "An Ancient Gesture" in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay* stresses the poem as a symbol of "women whose dreams are denied, whose bodies are assaulted, whose minds and spirits are extinguished."²⁸ Yet, Debra Fried, in a rebuttal to Stanbrough published in the same volume, asserts that Millay demonstrates not the vulnerability of women but their strength.²⁹ The poem yields somewhat duality, both of a woman's life and of the woman as artist. Penelope's cry of grief symbolizes heroic endurance and victimization. Penelope, the constant weaver, can be seen as a hero, a symbol of woman's creativity as well as a source of culture. In her essay in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Sandra M. Gilbert remarks that in "An Ancient Gesture" the most significant change in the myth is that the poem "questions the epic posturings of one of history's primordial heroes...Ulysses loses his solid heroic stature as a savior of civilization in the poem, while Penelope captures the stage as a mother of culture. Ulysses copies her gesture."³⁰ However, as Gilbert shows, the male tradition implied of the heroic is longer and deeper than a woman heroic tradition.

Millay destroys the boundaries that confine women, using her public persona to spread the message that women cannot be neatly defined or classified. She "was writing in a way that is easily understood, inviting the readers in, and as an attempt to make a community with them to heal alienation,"³¹ the point that lies at the core of feminism. "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" and "An Ancient Gesture" presents examples of the ways in which Millay used her poetry to appeal to the readers (a large many of whom were women) that are estranged by patriarchal system. According to Millay, patriarchy can be linked to the very sense of Other that always alienates women. As a woman writing for other women, Millay attempts to organize women into community by using the impoverished widow and the weeping woman as a heroes and makes from her a symbol for salvation and sacrifice. Like Penelope, Millay often stayed up all night and exhausted herself. Millay further admitted, "I am a very concentrated person as an artist. . . . The nervous intensity attendant on writing poetry, on creative writing, exhausts me, and I suffer constantly from a headache."³² While she often wrote of the differences between men and women as people, Millay did not think a woman poet should be treated differently from a male poet: "What you produce, what you create must stand on its own feet, regardless of your sex."³³ She did not like being characterized as a woman artist in a separate category by

male critics, because this implied that she was inferior. However, she made a point of refusing to explain or to defend her choices. Rather, she kept writing, working at her poetic loom.

NOTES

- 1Anne Chenny, *Millay in Greenwich Village* (New York: University of Alabama Press, 1975), 120.
- 2Frank Northen Magill, Dayton Kohler, and Laurence W. Mazzeno, *Master Plots: 1,801 Plot Stories and Critical Evaluations of the World's Finest Literature* (Michigan: Salem University Press, 1996), 2761.
- 3Patricia A. Klemans, "Being Born a Woman: A New Look at Edna St. Vincent Millay," *Colby Library Quarterly* 15, no. 3, 1 (March: 1979): 7, <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq> (accessed:11/7/2012).
- 4Polly Vedder, *World Literature Criticism a Selection of Major Authors from Gale's Literary Criticism Series* (Detroit: Gale, 1997), 589.
- 5Lisa Myers, "Her Mother Voice," in *Millay at 100 A Critical Reappraisal*, ed. Diane P. Freedman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 73.
- 6Ibid, 68-69; Walter S. Minot, "Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree:' The Problem of the Artist as Woman," *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (Jun., 1975):264, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/364663> (accessed: 07/11/2012).
- 7Debra Fried, "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets," in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. William B. Thesing (New York: G.K. Hall and Company,1993), 230.
- 8Adrienne Rich, "When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," introduction to *A Woman's Place: Rhetoric and Readings for Composing Yourself and Your Prose*, by Shirley Morahan (Albany: New York University Press, 1981), 9.
- 9Samuel Maio, *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Missouri: Truman University Press, 2005), 16.
- 10Myers, 69-75.
- 11Ibid.,69.
- 12Ibid.
- 13Dolores Bausum, *Threading Time: A Cultural History of Threadwork* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2001), 183.
- 14Jane M. Snyder, "The Web of Song. Weaving Imagery in Homer and Greek Literature, *The Classical Journal* 76 (1981): 196.

- 15Myers, 69-75.
- 16Ibid.
- 17Ibid.
- 18Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 241.
- 19Myers, 69-75.
- 20Milford, 216; Minot, 264,
- 21Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter, eds., *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*, vol. 6 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 189.
- 22Wesley Longhofer, *Social Theory Re-wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 340.
- 23Cheryl Walker, *Masks Outrageous and Austere: Culture, Psyche, and Persona in Modern Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 164.
- 24X.J. Kennedy, "Edna St. Vincent Millay's Doubly Burning Candles," *The New Criticism*, <http://www.newcriticism.com/articles.cfm/Edna-St--Vincent-Millay-s-doubly-burning-candles-2146> (accessed: 1/26/2014).
- 25Catherine Anne Ramsden, "Desire and Agency in the Modern Women's Sonnet," *Dissertations* 541 (2012): 116.
- 26Sara Constantakis, *Poetry for Students*, vol. 34 (Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010), 3.
- 27Rhonda S. Pettit, *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 187.
- 28Jane Stanbrough, "Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Language of Vulnerability," in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 183.
- 29Debra Fried, "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets," in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. William B. Thesing (New York: G.K. Hall and Company,1993), 236.
- 30Sandra M Gilbert, "Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality," in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. William B. Thesing (New York: G. K. Hall & Co.,1993), 296.
- 31Suzanne Clark, "Jouissance and the Sentimental Daughter: Edna St. Vincent Millay," in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women*

Poets and Their Readers, ed. Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 150.

32Milford, 58.

33Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Feminist literary criticism recognizes that poetry both reflects culture and reshapes it to a certain extent. Millay reads Penelope and women in general as a subject of subverting and resisting the dominant ideology. Sacrifice is Millay's crucial medium that can either perpetuate or help to eliminate the oppression of women. As Penelope makes an inner journey from the sad fixity of her twenty-year isolation, Millay proves her ability to connect the epic past of Homer's famous Odyssey to the modern woman. Millay highlights the woman's role in maintaining order and continuity in society. In Millay's poems, women offer a meditation on Penelope's tears at her husband's absence, in ways the tears of all women, and then compares and contrasts them to the tears of men, as from the person of Ulysses. The two women assimilate Penelope spontaneously in a moment of emotion. Millay does not throw out an intellectual reference to the Greek myth but, rather, has a heartfelt and personal connection to Penelope, who captures the stage as a mother of culture.

ملخص البحث

تبرز أهمية الادب اليوناني كونه مصدر التراث الغربي في الشعر، والفلسفة، والعلوم. ويمكن رؤية هذا في شخصية بينيلوب التي لعبت دوراً رئيسياً في ملحمة هوميروس باعتبارها رمزا ليس فقط لتجارب المرأة بشكل عام بل لتجاربها كأديبة في عالم يسيطر عليه الرجل. يحاول هذا البحث دراسة اسطورة بنيلوب كأداة ايديولوجية في النظام الابوي معارضا التميز الجنسي في الاسطورة الاغريقية. حيث تمت اعادة صياغة الاسطورة من قبل الشاعرة الامريكية الحديثة ادنا سينت فينسنت ميلاي والتي عرضت الصور النمطية المنصوص عليها في الاساطير اليونانية بشكل يبرز دور المرأة الفاعل ويشجع الحركة النسوية ويظهر دورها.

يحاول هذا البحث ان يقتفي تطور الوعي التحرري الذي وصلت اليه المرأة في القرن العشرين معتمدا على "مساواة الجنسين" كونه المحور الاساسي الذي

يدور حوله البحث مركزا على الملحمة اليونانية الاوديسيا . يتناول البحث قصيدة
"اغنية شعبية من قيثارة الحائك" من ديوان قيثارة الحائك و قصائد اخرى، و
"الاشارة القديمة" من ديوان نقب الحصاد . اكدت الشاعره ان دور المرأة في بيئتها
لا يقل فاعلية عن دور الرجل ولا يمكن لأي مجتمع ان يبني حضارة دون ان
تساهم فيه المرأة مساهمة فعالة.

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