

Vincent Returns

A review of

Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay by Nancy Milford

and

What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay by Daniel Mark Epstein

By Deborah Block-Schwenk

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), known to many of her friends as Vincent, was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, receiving the award in 1923. She thrilled audiences around the United States on her book tours, and thousands listened to her readings over nationwide radio in the winter of 1932-33. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, her sonnet sequence "Fatal Interview" sold 33,000 copies in ten weeks in the spring of 1931.

An unabashedly sexual woman, she held to her belief in free love her entire life, from her relationships with women at Vassar College to her long marriage to businessman Eugen Boissevain.

Unfortunately, once the classical forms and sometimes archaic language of her poems were displaced in popularity by the more abstract structures of modern poetry, Millay was relegated to the ranks of minor poets, her work rarely discussed, and her life rarely examined.

Thankfully, 2001 brought the publication of not one but two biographies about Millay, spurring a revival of interest in her life and work. To their credit, both mention her bisexuality and open marriage matter-of-factly, though each author frames those issues differently. But neither book fully satisfied my desire to understand what inspired this complex woman and moved her to write poems that I turn to again and again for their vivid descriptions of nature and their sensual and relentless portraits of love and romantic anguish.

Nancy Milford's 500-plus page volume has received more publicity, and is the more comprehensive of the two biographies. Focused somewhat as a "family biography," Milford researched much of the book while Vincent's younger sister, Norma Millay Ellis, was still alive, and the biography contains many anecdotes and opinions from Norma about her sister's life that add to the volume's intimacy and immediacy.

Milford uses personal anecdotes throughout the volume to bring in others' impressions of Millay. One that stuck in my mind was the author's interview with Margot Schulyer. She and Millay had a brief affair in Paris in 1922: "Certainly, she did not look at all as I expected her to look. We took hands. We talked. And later that afternoon we went to bed together." (pg 230). Schulyer describes Millay's "inner throbbing of excitement that always affected everyone who met her" (pg.230) in a later letter to a friend; she would keep one of the poet's monogrammed handkerchiefs her entire life as a remembrance of their relationship.

Such stories give us glimpses of Millay's charisma and passion, hints of her ability to attract both men and women. But these hints never coalesce into a clear picture. The poet who railed at her doom to "...be prisoner till my pulses stop/To hateful Love and drag his noisy chain," (Fatal Interview, sonnet XVIII) repeatedly inflicted those chains on others, some of whom she dropped after a short time, while others became life-long friends. (Several of these ex-lovers were also writers, and left their own accounts of their relationships with Millay, which Milford quotes extensively). However, Milford's chatty prose never fuses these different accounts into one picture that captures Millay's beauty and charm. The photos that accompany the book capture Millay in many moods and states of health; none capture that "inner throbbing of excitement" that Margot Schulyer (and so many others) fell in love with.

"Savage Beauty" doesn't provide much context for putting Millay's life in perspective with the times she lived in, and this is a serious flaw. Several times Milford's book left me with lingering questions which the other biography by Epstein answered. One example was Millay's relationship with Floyd Dell in 1917-18. Dell was one of the editors of a radical left-wing magazine The Masses; he and others were tried under the Espionage Act for opposing the United State's entry into in WWI. Millay accompanied him to his trial in the spring of 1918 even though their romantic relationship had ended, but Milford never mentions whether Millay shared any of Dell's socialist views or was simply there as a friend. (Epstein noted that it was more the latter; although Millay would write an anti-war play in 1920, she never subscribed to socialist principles). Milford is also hesitant to provide much information about the illnesses that plagued Millay for much of the last decades of her life, only mentioning a car accident after many pages and not addressing the vague and ill-defined stomach problems that led to surgery in 1923. (Epstein suggests one likely candidate as Chron's(??) disease.)

When Milford does provide analysis, she brings a lot of insight to it. In her interpretation of Millay's "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," the impoverished mother who kills herself weaving clothes on a magic harp for her freezing son is symbolic of Millay's mother, Cora. Cora left a negligent and possibly abusive husband to raise three daughters alone, and her iron will was an influence in all of her daughter's lives. More effort spent on interpreting and contextualizing Millay's life would have made Milford's biography a much more important work for those unfamiliar with the poet's work or the times in which she lived.

After reading Milford's sweeping and conversational style, Mark Epstein's book promised more focus (and was a lot shorter). Since I'd discovered Millay through her love poems, especially her sonnets, I had high hopes for a book subtitled "The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay." And Epstein's book does provide some needed context and answered some questions Milford's book doesn't address, as noted above.

What Epstein didn't do any better than Milford is get to the heart of Millay's famous allure. While more honestly depicting her promiscuity, Epstein describes her tendency to have many lovers as a compulsion, which struck me as both unfair and sexist. Whether or not her relationships (and they tended to be relationships, although short-lived) were emotionally healthy for her, Millay turned those experiences into incredible poetry and a vision of sexual and personal freedom that inspired the jazz age generation.

It's not difficult to trace Millay's refusal to believe in lasting love to her family background (both her mother and grandmother had left loveless marriages), though no doubt other factors contributed. Millay's sensual, experience-driven nature would have provide her with a passionate enjoyment in the pleasures of the moment. Whether those factors drove her to sexual addiction -- or compulsion, as Epstein more delicately puts it -- seems to me to be entirely subjective. While Millay definitely craved the rush of emotion at the beginning of a relationship, her position as a sexually free woman was (and in many cases still is) a lifestyle that is far easier for others to criticize than if a man were doing the same thing. That Millay dared to "cry holy, holy/upon the name of love however brief," (Collected Poems, sonnet cxxix) is to me a statement more radical than dysfunctional. Many of Millay's ex-lovers became lifelong friends, and her marriage lasted until Boissevain's death in 1949 -- 26 years. Neither of these facts seem to support someone whose sexual life was ruled by a compulsion.

When Millay married Dutch businessman Eugen Boissevain, it was with full knowledge on both their parts that liaisons with others would be allowed. They were committed to the principle of free love; Millay not even discriminating on the basis of gender, though her same-sex relationships were few and far between once she left the women-only atmosphere of Vassar College. Nevertheless, they were unprepared for Millay's intense and painful relationship with poet George Dillon, whom she met in 1928 when he was only 22 (she was 36).

Reading the excerpts from their correspondence included in both volumes, I wished more than once the three of them, especially Millay and Boissevain, had access to the kind of polyamory support groups that exist today. Boissevain gallantly left his beloved wife and her lover alone in Paris, giving them some precious time alone while hoping it wouldn't damage their marriage irrevocably. Millay cherished the intensity of feeling that her relationship with Dillon brought her, even when quarrels, schedules, and her continued love of her husband drove them apart for long periods of time. From the emotional storms of the first phase of their relationship, Millay crafted the sonnet sequence "Fatal Interview," published to great fanfare in 1931. (The relationship with Dillon would fade, although he remained a friend for the rest of her life).

The sonnets of "Fatal Interview" remain some of my favorite poems, combining romantic language with the very modern awareness of a strong woman brave enough to pursue her desires:

Yet in an hour to come, disdainful dust,
You shall be bowed and brought to bed with me.
While the blood roars, or when the blood is rust
About a broken engine, this shall be.
If not today, then later; if not here
On the green grass, with sighing and delight,
Then under it, all in good time, my dear,
We shall be laid together in the night.

--from sonnet VIII

In Millay's later life, illness overtook her, leading into an addiction to morphine (she also drank heavily). She still wrote, not just her own poems but translations of Baudelaire (a joint project with George Dillon). She willingly sacrificed much of her reputation among her peers to write propaganda poetry urging support for the Allies during WWII, yet another instance in which Millay used any means at her disposal to put forth her beliefs (years earlier, she was arrested for protesting Sacco and Vanzetti's execution).

After several attempts, she conquered her addiction. She lived through the deaths of both her parents, her younger sister, Kathleen, and her husband. Finally, at the age of 58, she died, apparently from a fall down the stairs that broke her neck.

Edna St. Vincent Millay lived an amazing life and her courage as a woman, especially as a unashamedly sexual woman, should not be dismissed. She brought that same courage and passion to her poetry, and I'm glad her life has been explored by these two biographers. While each book is unsatisfying in its own way, together they complement each other nicely. The places where they contradict is oddly enlightening. Epstein treats Millay's same-sex affairs as an outlet she indulged in only when men weren't available, while Milford makes no judgements about Millay's preferences and instead offers the moving interview with Margot Schulyer to show that Millay's beauty and charm effected everyone, regardless of gender.

On the other hand, Milford is sketchy about Millay and Boissevain's finances, while Epstein points out that even while the couple was in debt to Millay's publisher, they were giving financial assistance to friends as well as trying to help Millay's mentally ill sister Kathleen, which whom they had a rocky relationship.

Yet, while I appreciated the information about Millay's life that I got from both books, they are lacking something. I can only return to Millay's poetry, to her endless quest for love, and to her honesty. Her writing was her life's work, so while biographies can piece facts together, her poetry is the best place, still, to understand what was in her heart.