September 1991

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 27, no.3, September 1991, p.132-147

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The Force of Flippancy:
Edna Millay’s Satiric Sketches
of the Early 1920s

by WILL BRANTLEY

Throughout her career Edna St. Vincent Millay was drawn to dialectical situations. In “Renascence,” the early poem that brought her to the public’s attention, she dramatizes the need to die from a world that is spiritually oppressing while countering this need with the equally strong desire for rebirth into a way of life that is in synch with the joys of the external world. In the sonnet sequence Fatal Interview (1931), Millay positions the sometimes overwhelming need for love against the painful recognition that love does not last. Perhaps the most apparent dialectic in Millay’s work derives from the tension between the modernity of her subject matter—her insistence on the woman’s right to live as she pleases—and her preference for conventional and often restrictive literary forms such as the ballad and the sonnet. Millay did not fear her seemingly contradictory impulses: during the early twenties, the era of her greatest popularity—the period when she became an emblem of the age—Millay was writing some of her most memorable and somber lyrics, while contributing a series of satires, mostly dialogues and short-short stories, to monthly magazines—a body of work she would later publish in part as Distressing Dialogues (1924). What I will provide in this essay is a new assessment of these satirical sketches—their techniques and targets, as well as their genesis and importance for Millay the feminist poet.

1

Surprisingly, while Millay’s poetry has received considerable attention (over one hundred reviews and articles appeared in 1937 alone), her satire has rarely been given the recognition it merits in a full assessment of her career. By choosing to use a pseudonym, Nancy Boyd, to ensure that she would be recognized foremost as a poet, Millay may have led critics to dismiss an intriguing part of her literary output. Elizabeth Atkins’ remark that any of the slight and trivial lyrics in A Few Figs from Thistles (1922) might have been signed just as easily with Millay’s pseudonym is indicative of the subordinate position critics have generally assigned her satirical writing (76). Atkins’ breezy dismissal is the single reference to the Nancy Boyd material in what is the first book-length study of Millay.1 Certain comments in her letters and interviews

suggest, however, that Millay took all her work seriously. Her satirical sketches are more than curiosity pieces; taken together, they catalog many of Millay’s sharpest observations about the attitudes and obsessions that helped to shape, and in turn were shaped by, the mood of her age.

Readers of Millay who have not heard of her satirical writing are nonetheless familiar with the satirical quality of much of her verse, and could identify her chief targets with ease. James Gray isolates Millay’s enemies as tawdriness, mediocrity, meanness, and vulgarity (25); Gray notes that her use of the epigram—“for her an entirely spontaneous form of expression”—is suitable to a wit that “mocks at prudery, at self-deception, at all the false sentiments of the unco guid” (30). One such sentiment, and a favorite target of Millay’s, is virtue that makes a display of itself. In a characteristic poem called “The Penitent” (1918) she has this to say about the matter:

I had a little sorrow,
Born of a little sin,
I found a room all damp with gloom
And shut us all within:
And. “Little Sorrow, weep.” said I,
“And. Little Sin, pray God to die,
And I upon the floor will lie
And think how bad I’ve been!”

Alas for pious planning—
It mattered not a whit!
As far as gloom went in that room,
The lamp might have been lit!
My little Sorrow would not weep,
My little Sin would go to sleep—
To save my soul I could not keep
My graceless mind on it!

So up I got in anger,
And took a book I had,
And put a ribbon on my hair
To please a passing lad.
And. “One thing there’s no getting by—
I’ve been a wicked girl,” said I;
But if I can’t be sorry, why.
I might as well be glad!” (CP, 139–40)

(Colby Quarterly, Vol. 27, Iss. 3 [1991], Art. 4)

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of Edna St. Vincent Millay (1982); hence all citations to Brittin will refer to this book-length study. John J. Patton’s “Satiric Fiction in Millay’s Distressing Dialogues” is an attempt at generic classification. Patton argues that though Millay tends to blur the distinction between fiction and expository prose, her satirical sketches can be adequately defined as brief Menippean satire which presents characters as embodiments of the ideas they represent, and which includes a variety of forms such as the fable, the short-short story, the monologue, and so on. See Modern Language Studies 2 (1972): 63–67. Though most of the criticism of Millay since 1970 has examined her work from a feminist perspective, none of this criticism has dealt with her satire, an interesting oversight considering that the Nancy Boyd material comprises roughly one fourth of Millay’s total work. See, for example, Patricia A. Klemans, “ ‘Being Born a Woman’: A New Look at Edna St. Vincent Millay,” Colby Library Quarterly 15 (1979): 7–18, and Jane Stanbrough, “Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Language of Vulnerability,” Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), 183–99.
The sexual innuendo, the childlike voice, the playful tone—all are features of Millay’s way of dismantling Puritan prudery and the insincere penitence it fosters.

There is, of course, another side to Millay’s satirical voice, a side best exemplified in a later poem, “Apostrophe to Man” (1933), where she exhorts the “detestable race” of homo sapiens to “expunge” itself and “die out.” A series of disparate images and a mocking tone undercut the Old Guard’s contention that war can ever be justified: “Convert again into explosives the bewildered ammonia and the distracted cellulose; / Convert again into putrescent matter drawing flies / The hopeful bodies of the young . . .” (302). Millay became increasingly outraged over man’s war-making proclivities and the political chaos that led to World War II. Yet between the scorn of “Apostrophe to Man” and the teasing lyricism of “The Penitent,” there is a wide ground of behavior and beliefs that found a willing and able adversary in the persona of Nancy Boyd.

That the creation of this persona was in part the result of Millay’s need of an increased income is clear; yet this fact within itself should not obscure the significance of the work she chose to publish under another name. Millay’s several biographers all note that money was a central worry for the poet, who could not live off the pittance she made from her poems and from her performances with the Provincetown Players and other theatre groups. In *Millay in Greenwich Village*, a biography that focuses on Millay’s “Bohemian” years, 1917–1920, Anne Cheney explains that W. Adolphe Roberts, editor of *Ainslee’s*, conceived of a financially rewarding plan in January 1919 that would require Millay to write short fiction “which they concurred was ‘potboiling,’ under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd” (112). One of Millay’s first references to her pseudonym comes in a letter to Arthur Davison Ficke, October 1919, where she takes pleasure in identifying herself as Nancy Boyd to one of her Greenwich Village lovers: “I have a story, I think, in the present, in the immediately preceding, & in the about-to-appear, issues of *Ainslee’s* magazine.—No, I am not getting rich,—but I could, if I had the slightest iota of business sense.—Some of my stories are good, some are bad,—almost invariably they are beautifully written, after a flippant fashion” (*Letters*, 91). Such a remark suggests that though the scheme to write fiction may have grown out of a financial need, Millay was not willing to prostitute her artistry altogether: her stories would at least be “beautifully written.” In an interview with Elizabeth Breuer in 1931, Millay made this telling remark regarding her Nancy Boyd pieces: “I know they sound as if they tripped off my typewriter, but I had such anguish of mind over them, so much preparation went into them that even now I could say some of them by heart…” (52).

Norman Brittin summarizes the early Nancy Boyd stories in *Ainslee’s*, a publication that is not easily accessible to most readers. Brittin notes that these early stories are all concerned with the problems of male/female relationships and among the various themes at least three are prominent: “the question of love versus career, the approval of Greenwich Village attitudes, and the overwhelming of men by love” (54). “The White Peacock” is representative. Antoinette, its
heroine, is of a mixed French-Oriental background; her father sends her to a Quaker school in the United States since, in Antoinette's words, he "feared always for my strange soul if I should continue . . . a worshiper of idols, he bade me forswear forever great Buddha, and Shaka, and my holy ancestors, and even his own Sainte Vierge Marie and Jesus Christ, her son, and my sainte Antoine de Padone, and to love God simply, simply . . . ."2 Antoinette's American husband, Bailey, resents her worship of the peacock image embroidered on a wall, so he burns the embroidery while Antoinette is in a trance. Later that night he and Antoinette make love, but their lovemaking does not stifle Antoinette's mysticism, and Bailey is stunned when Antoinette tells him, in a manner evocative of Millay's early poetry, that her life has not been altered by their liaison: "Last night—poof! What was it? A man and a woman in each other's arms! Sweet, yes, perhaps you call ecstasy, but la! not rare! As for me—ah, I slept a little, and dreamed, and it was not of thee" ("Peacock," 104). Bailey is not able to master his intelligent wife; at the end of the story she is holding a brass bowl containing the ashes of the white peacock—a symbol which recalls D. H. Lawrence and the primacy he gave to art in life. The story is a romance, but satirical elements are everywhere apparent: Millay derides the simple-minded man who believes he can so easily master the will of the woman who is "made Oriental to contrast both with the simple Bailey and with the usual Western woman who is 'one lady always, and does not change at all!' " (Brittin, 57).

The other seven stories written for Ainslee's, along with "Sentimental Salon," which Otto Liverright sold to The Metropolitan Magazine, are also primarily romances, but satirical elements are never absent. Gradually Millay evolved what Brittin describes as a distinctive manner: "a combination of wit and archness, high-falutin circumlocution, and a languid air of sophistication" (57–58). Two of these stories, "The Seventh Stair" and "Sentimental Salon," were coauthored by Millay's sister Norma. "The Seventh Stair" is actually a complicatedly plotted novella, and one can guess that Millay realized with this work that her storytelling would be more effective if the pieces were kept brief in order that none of her typically terse expression get lost in a mesh of opposing elements. Anne Cheney notes that Roberts nonetheless arranged to pay Millay four-hundred dollars for "The Seventh Stair"—an impressive amount for any work at the time—and in a letter to Norma from Paris, March 1921, Millay asked her sister if she remembered "how we worked finishing up The Seventh Stair," comparing their collaborative effort to her "slaving" attempt "to typewrite & ship off" The Lamp and the Bell, a play she was writing at the time (Letters, 116).

Millay began to sell her pseudonymous work to Vanity Fair rather than to Ainslee's, partly because Edmund Wilson encouraged her to do so. In his memoir of Millay that concludes The Shores of Light, Wilson is candid about his effort "to cultivate her acquaintance by way of Vanity Fair" where he was an editorial assistant in the early twenties: "She had at that time no real market for her poems;

she sold a lyric now and then to the highbrow Dial, on the one hand, or to the trashy Ainslee’s, on the other hand. She was hard-up and lived with her mother and sisters at the very end of West Nineteenth Street...” (750). Wilson claims that he had no trouble falling in love with Millay, and, in an impassioned manner that characterizes almost all his remarks about her, he adds that one cannot really write about Edna Millay without bringing into the foreground of the picture her intoxicating effect on people, because this so much created the atmosphere in which she lived and composed...Let me register this unfashionable opinion here, and explain that Edna Millay seems to me one of the only poets writing in English in our time who have attained to anything like the stature of great literary figures in an age in which prose has predominated. (751–52)

That Millay was grateful to Wilson for his support is clear from her correspondence at the time; in a letter to her mother, December 20, 1920, she outlines the plan Wilson had helped to make possible: “The editor of Vanity Fair [titles are rarely italicized in Millay’s letters] has a scheme which calls for my doing two articles a month for the magazine, one under my own name & one under Nancy Boyd. So I am going to Europe, technically as ‘foreign correspondent’ for Vanity Fair, although the articles need not necessarily be foreign articles,—probably most of them will be.” Millay uses the term “article” quite loosely, and she did not end up focusing her attention on “foreign” concerns while she was abroad. She did realize that she needed to leave the United States for a while, adding in this letter that her work, especially her poetry, needed “fresh grass to feed on,” that she was “becoming sterile” in New York (Letters, 106). Millay was, in fact, under a great deal of stress at the time, and the trip to Europe seems to have enabled her to concentrate more fully on all her work and not just her poetry.3

When Wilson urged Millay to sell her work to Vanity Fair, he had more in mind than just her financial and mental well-being; he knew that Vanity Fair would bring Millay to the attention of a larger and more important public, for she would then share printed space with Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, among others. In an unpublished memoir called “Tiger Lily,” W. Adolphe Roberts writes that Millay’s name by 1921 “had disappeared from Ainslee’s, rightly and inevitably. Vanity Fair had the privilege of launching her as a success with a public that counted” (qtd. in Cheney, 112).

In his seminal study of the twenties, Frederick Hoffman underscores the centrality of Vanity Fair to the mood and achievement of the age: “It is hard to imagine a magazine more appropriate to the decade than Vanity Fair. Its pages were filled with pertinent references to the customs of the time, parodies of its pretensions, serious discussion of its intellectual interests (or lack of them), and in the advertisements, appeals to the wealthy and the snobbish”; it was, in short, a “handbook for the sophisticate,” and, as Hoffman very carefully points out, “perhaps its most successful offerings were the parodies, the cartoons, the sophisticated treatment of customs and pretensions” (109).

3. In a letter to John Peale Bishop from Paris, July 3, 1921. Wilson describes the change the trip had helped to bring about in Millay: “I have...seen Edna a couple of times. I found her in a very first-rate hotel on the Left Bank and better dressed. I suppose, than she has ever been before in her life. You were right too in guessing that she was well cared for as she had never been before. She also seems to be in very good health. the phase of being run down...had passed” (Literature and Politics, 67).
Among the topics debated or satirized by writers as diverse as H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, Robert Benchley, George Herriman, John Peale Bishop, Donald Ogden Steward, e. e. cummings, and Samuel Hoffenstein (who includes two parodies of Millay in Poems in Praise of Practically Nothing) were "the overwhelming stupidity of Prohibition"—the phrase is Hoffman’s, but could belong to any of the men I’ve named—the failures and pretensions of the “Old Gang,” crazes and prank cures, depth psychology, censorship, fashions and trends in literature, and the affectations of the young—a Millay specialty. Millay was in first-rate company at Vanity Fair, publishing the bulk of her work (all of her Nancy Boyd pieces and much of her poetry) in a magazine that was successful at bridging the gap between high and popular art. Cheney says that Wilson, “always maintaining his protective role,” was occasionally required to appease editor Frank Crowninshield’s “understandable irritation” when Millay had been lax in submitting new work (73). Nevertheless, Crowninshield was willing to admit that Millay was one of his most highly prized contributors, and her success at Vanity Fair may be attested to by the fact that he was ready to resume publication of her in 1928, five years after her last story appeared in April 1923, a piece concerned with American stereotypes that Millay published under her own name with the enticing title, “‘Say Shibboleth’—A Dialogue between a Sentimental Citizen and an Advertising Expert.”

It seems unlikely that Wilson, attempting merely to fulfill his editorial duties, would try to convince Millay to publish all her work under her own name—even her “merely cute feminine pieces”—had he not respected her prose as well as her poetry (Shores of Light, 767–68). That Millay refused to sign her own name to everything she wrote has led at least one biographer to contend that she considered her Nancy Boyd stories “strictly bread and butter pieces” (Gurko, 104), when in fact Millay’s attitude toward her pseudonymous work is more complicated than one might first suspect. In a letter to Wilson, September 14, 1922, she requests that he not tamper in any way with a piece called “The Key” which was published three months later under her own name: “. . . please don’t cut it, or do anything to it, or let anybody else, but just send it back to me & I’ll send you something in its place.—There were a couple changes made in The Barrel, & I was furious. Don’t let Crownie [Crowninshield] do anything to anything that’s signed by my own name.” She then shifts to a consideration of those pieces published under her pseudonym:

As for Nancy, that’s a little different.—But Crownie asked me once if, should he want to use two Nancy Boyd things in the same number, I would be willing to have him sign some other name to one of them. I replied that I should be perfectly willing. But I must have been drunk at the time, because I’m not willing at all. Don’t even let him do that.” (Letters, 159–60)

This, one can conclude, is not the response of a writer to a body of work she

4. See Brittin, 61–63, for a discussion of the six stories Millay published under her own name in Vanity Fair during 1922 and 1923, all of which are longer than the pieces in Distressing Dialogues, and all of which “are quite different in intention and tone from her stories in Anslee’s, for they are fabulistic, or fairy tale-like pieces with satirical elements” (61). Brittin says “The Key” invites comparison with James Branch Cabell, yet none of these stories strikes me as more impressive than the sketches Millay was publishing during the same period under her pseudonym.
regarded as solely incidental and part of nothing more than a moneymaking venture.\(^5\)

It is my guess that Millay took great satisfaction in having devised a scheme which would assure that she was regarded (and remembered) primarily for her verse, while availing herself of the opportunity to experiment with looser forms and different voices. As the reviews of *Distressing Dialogues* indicate, no one “in the know” failed to realize Nancy Boyd’s true identity—the book is even copyrighted by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Millay never refers to Nancy’s efforts as her own, and what emerges from her letters is a sometimes playful reflexivity. Writing from Shillingston, England, to her sister Norma and Charles Ellis (who had both performed in the Provincetown Players’ production of Millay’s *Aria da Capo*), she says, for example, that “Nancy is going to write a play, she just told me so... Nancy is going strong in *Vanity Fair*, isn’t she? Isn’t she a blessing? Almost two years now the woman has been supporting me.” In another part of this letter Millay indicates why she may have felt the need of an alter ego, and why she might have taken delight in vexing the public who would too neatly categorize her as this or that kind of writer:

Floyd Dell sent me a copy of his book of plays—Sweet-and-Twenty is dedicated to me, as perhaps you know—and told me he loves The Poet and his Book. I’m glad people are beginning to notice that poem. I’m so tired of hearing about Renascence I’m nearly dead. I find it’s as hard to live down an early triumph as an early indiscretion; if Renascence had been an illegitimate child people couldn’t have flung it in my face any oftener. (*Letters*, 165–66)

In a sense Millay’s satire is her illegitimate child, yet as I will point out, some of the satires are quite serious, and as “The Penitent” indicates, much of her poetry is as “flippant” as any of the Nancy Boyd pieces. Worth noting is the fact that Millay did not publish as many stories under her own name as her original agreement with Crowninshield called for; significant also is her decision to include for book publication in 1924 only twenty-two selections which had appeared under her pseudonym in *Vanity Fair* between January 1921 and March 1923—a clear indication that these are the pieces she felt to be her best.

**II**

One could argue that Nancy Boyd’s view of life was not *ipso facto* that of Edna Millay’s, but it would be difficult to ignore their rather obvious affinity in light of Millay’s brief preface to *Distressing Dialogues*:

Miss Boyd has asked me to write a preface to these dialogues, with which, having followed them eagerly as they appeared from time to time in the pages of *Vanity Fair*, I was already familiar. I am no friend of prefaces. but if there must be one to this book, it should come from me, who was its

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5. Millay’s concern about her pseudonymous writings is evident in her attention to even the most minute details. After her last Nancy Boyd piece—a nonsatirical poem written for Franklin P. Adams’s column in the *New York World*—received an award for best contribution of the year, Millay wrote to Adams to make sure that the award, a watch, would be inscribed to Nancy—“Else she’ll be mad.” Attached to the letter is a postscript: “There was a word left out of ‘The Armistice Day Parade.’ I didn’t notice till long after. Didn’t matter much. I wrote it ‘Same as the clergy.’ & it was printed ‘Same as clergy.’ If I’d known it was to go into a book I wouldn’t told you” (*Letters*, 207–08).
author's earliest admirer. I take pleasure in recommending to the public these excellent small satires from the pen of one in whose work I have a never-failing interest and delight.

The Preface is dated May 6, 1924; it was written while Millay was in Tokyo during a tour of the Orient.

Of the pieces included in Distressing Dialogues, eight are short stories, three are letter sketches, one is a free-verse poem, another is written in the style of an eighteenth-century almanac and chronicles the encroachment of political and moral conservatism in the first part of the century, and nine are dialogues or mini-dramas. All of the pieces are short—brevity being central to the desired effect and to the magazine's space restrictions. When Millay said that she realized the pieces sound as if they had “tripped off” the typewriter, she was articulating, consciously or unconsciously, a distinguishing feature of the satirist's art—the “look, no hands” effect. That Millay seems particularly drawn to the dialogue isn’t surprising considering her dramatic bent, her preference for dialectical situations, and her ability to convey the subtle nuances of different voices and personalities. Even in some of the six first-person stories the narrators appear to be engaging in conversations with themselves. The dialogues are highly “playable.” Some feature only two he/she characters; others have multiple scene changes and suggest the effect of several characters moving around and speaking at once.

The dialogues tend to focus on conflicts between the sexes, on the nuisances of behavior that is too rigidly proscribed by gender. In “Roles and Salt,” the first of these (the first written, that is—the collection is arranged for variety rather than chronology), Millay stresses the “universal” applicability of her situation: two people, Philip and Lucille, at dinner in “the dining room of any fashionable hotel” at “quarter to eight o’clock of any evening” (215). Millay uses the dialogue to expose the contradictory thinking of the woman who wants to be noticed continually and yet left to do things for herself whenever she pleases. A similar concern is picked up in “Powder, Rouge and Lip-Stick” where Millay teases the woman character who thinks she is exempt from any criticism regarding her appearance simply because she is a woman. In an aside, Millay provides a subtly mocking description of the woman’s elaborate make-up process—one of her favorite targets—and when finally the woman can take no more of her husband’s criticism, we are told, in another aside, that “two round tears force their way through the mascara and roll down her face like twin black pearls; then two more, and then several more” (117). In “The Same Boat” Millay targets the woman character’s excessive virtue which for Millay becomes a “form of dissipation” (62). This woman’s appearance is impeccable: “Her throat and shoulders are such that to think of food in her presence is like taking a shoe-box of sandwiches to the Rodin Museum” (66–67). Of course the “she” character of these dialogues is not the sole victim of attack; Millay places equal emphasis on the female and the male’s ability to overdecorate themselves in “No Bigger Than a Man’s Hand”; and in “For Winter, For Summer” the wife outsmarts her husband, undermines his double standards, and craftily convinces him that he wants her to accompany him on an all-male camping trip.
Most of the characters in the dialogues are restless and bored; they are wealthy enough to have more than a sufficient amount of leisure time. They are people who don’t know what to do with themselves; so they find things to do, like patronize the arts. The many characters in “Tea for the Muse” speak in rapid succession of one another, each uttering his or her own insanity. “It’s the most marvelous thing to me the way people write poetry!” one remarks, “I couldn’t do it to save my life, I’m sure I couldn’t” (204). The subtitle of “Here Comes the Bride”—“The Tragedy of a Fashionable Wedding in Ten Farces”—cues the reader’s expectations right away. The tragedy (or farce—the two are interchangeable) centers on the absurd conventions of this typically overdone ritual. The Maid of Honor complains, “People really ought to write on their cards what it is they’re sending, how much it cost, and where you can get it changed” (245).

Often Millay’s lavish description of the mise en scène of the dialogues defines the personalities of the characters even before they begin to converse. Such is the case with “Breakfast in Bed”:

Scene: A bedroom, furnished caressingly and at the outlay of no contemptible expense in what might be termed the Lingerie Period—twin beds, dressing-table, writing-desk, etc., of hand-painted hepatica-lilac wood, with insertion of lacerated-raspberry. On the dressing-table, suspended from one horn of the mirror, an arresting assortment of neckties; suspended from the other, six elaborate boudoir-caps which have never been worn.

The characters in this dialogue actually appear to be part of the setting:

In one bed, asleep. Mrs. Turner: twenty-one, short black hair and straight bangs (formally Chinese), speed-well blue pajamas several sizes too large, heart-breakingly pretty. In the other bed, apparently asleep. Mr. Turner: twenty-six. smooth blonde hair, collar-advertisement chin and jaw, sardonic mouth—the ensemble rendered piquant by a nose that is undeniable retrousse. (258)

The emphasis on the excess of objects in this dialogue and in “Here Comes the Bride” recalls Pope’s elaborate description of the incongruous items on Belinda’s dressing vanity, and Millay suggests essentially the same confusion of values in a superficial though not unappealing society that has become obsessed by things.

Nancy A. Walker and Zita Dresner include one of the finest dialogues, “The Implacable Aphrodite,” in Redressing the Balance, their recent anthology of American women’s humor. Here Mr. White, a professional violinist and “a man of parts but badly assembled,” is infatuated with Miss Black, an artist who ignores his attentions. Mr. White is offensively patronizing—he believes that “A man’s wife ought to have some little thing to take up her time” (52; 227 in Walker and Dresner)—and Miss Black is self-absorbed, unnecessarily aloof, and of course restless. The satire’s chief concern is the characters’ inability to respond to one another without affectation. It’s of course significant that the inept attempts of these characters to communicate or to avoid communication are juxtaposed against the perfection of their dress and the essentially useless, though immaculate, objects with which they surround themselves.

Of the eight stories included in Distressing Dialogues, most are distinguished by their concern with outworn social values and pretensions, and with vacuous pastimes. The first written of these stories, “The Greek Dance,” is also one of the
most astringently funny. A vogue in the early twenties, the Greek dance is for Millay emblematic of repressed gentility; she contrasts it with the unabashed frenzy of tropical dancers who “dispense entirely, whilst treading their ritualistic quadrilles, with the scarf, the veil, the artificial fig-leaf, which alone to our weak Western eyes make beauty sufferable” (87). The first-person narrator realizes that the Russian dance would be no acceptable substitute: “It can not be expected that a young woman of traditions would consent to appear in the afternoon before a mixed audience and make a noise with her feet,—and yell” (50). The narrator zeroes in on the lack of passion and sensuality in the Greek dance: “There are too many unattended ladies in it. Women are always monotonous in groups of more than one” (52). The story’s clincher is that the Greek dance isn’t really Greek: “What Greece would have been without her Chopin, it is impossible to conjecture” (93).

Similar in tone is “Out of Reach of the Baby,” where the presence of a pernicious infant comes to represent whatever it is we allow to stifle creativity, for anything that would harm the baby is put out of its limited reach. Millay’s implication is that people are generally willing to be treated like a baby, and “It’s not as if it were a nice baby, jolly, sweet-tempered, bright and all that. It’s a nasty, snivelling . . . stupid baby.” Furthermore, “it’s quite old, for a baby, but it can’t walk a step. . . . Of course, if you say to it, ‘mama,’ ‘horsie,’ ‘capitalist,’ ‘communism,’ ‘art,’ it repeats the words after you; but it hasn’t the faintest notion what it’s saying” (129). Playing off the buzz words of the day, the story is a caustic attack on censorship, and the things which have to be censored are, not surprisingly, music, dance, song, literature—anything that might subvert, that is develop, the infant’s ability to think.

“Ships and Sealing-Wax,” one of only two third-person stories, is a take-off on Alice in Wonderland and on people who fake knowledge in order to appear fashionable. Alice cannot help but pretend to know things, “For she was a finished young woman and moved in the best trapezoids” (272). And besides, “you have to talk about something!” or else “everybody would hear you swallowing your tea!” (276). The story achieves much of its humor through the walrus’s distortion of well-known maxims (“Hell is paved with good pretensions”) and his ability to tease most of the popular topics of the day, including Einstein’s Theory, dreams, sex, and Freud: “ ‘You have heard, perhaps,’ the walrus continued, turning to his companion, ‘of Mr. S. Freud, author of the popular ballad entitled Tell Me What You Dream and I Will Tell You What You Want?’ ” (274). The walrus speaks for Millay but the satire is double-edged: despite his fashionable ennui and superior wit, the walrus is indulging in the kind of conversation he himself pretends to detest.

“Knock Wood,” the other story with a third-person narrator, is a departure from the other pieces in Distressing Dialogues in that its satiric commentary is provided primarily through direct rather than indirect statement. Several people, gathered at a party, discuss their superstitions and beliefs. The story’s meaning is developed through the ways in which their comments play off of and negate one another. It is this story, more than the other pieces, that prefigures Millay’s
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Conversation at Midnight (1937), a verse drama—actually a sustained dialogue—that presents seven men of divergent backgrounds who gather to match wits and to discuss the major political, economic, and religious issues confronting their society just before the Second World War. It is also in “Knock Wood” that Millay’s talent for the epigram and her affinity with Oscar Wilde are especially evident. “Half-truths are all we have today,” she writes. “We live by them. And we live for them. Though of course we would not die for them. All the martyrs were martyred years and years ago” (188). Or in a slightly different vein: “The older we grow, the less chance we have of really seeing a thing when we look at it; what we see is a composite of all the opinions we have ever formed about it” (195). The story is a guarded defense of superstition and old adages, yet, as the Man with the Wrong Kind of Tie observes, many superstitions and long-held beliefs, such as the “common credo that ‘old age is beautiful,’ ” are damaging to our aesthetic lives: “Old age is intrinsically more beautiful than youth only if ashes are intrinsically more beautiful than fire... As the twig was bent, so the tree grew, so the log burned, and so the ashes lie. And nothing is in the ashes that was not in the log, saving the perfectly negative qualities of pallor, impotence, and chill” (197). With this remark the mood of the party is altered and the guests become uneasy since “they vaguely suspect in their midst the obscene presence of Poetry” (198), the appearance of which undermines their simple and complacent assurances.

The four remaining stories do not conclude with such a blow. “How to Be Happy Though Good” satirizes the absurdity of claiming that virtue is its own reward; it concludes with the prescription that since we cannot avoid sin, we should at least sin “without ostentation” (238). “Look Me Up” is disguised autobiography—it even alludes to Millay’s expulsion from Vassar. Often annoyed by invasions of her privacy, Millay here derides the fear of people “to be alone in the dark” (138), along with their desire to congregate when they have nothing but their sex in common. In “Madame a Tort!” Millay takes on “the most exacting of tyrants,” the beautician, and gently spoofs the woman who had at one time even felt the “desire to hold damp clay,” but whose one glance at her newly polished nails, “so rosy, so roundly pointed, so sadly bright, so exquisite from the loving care of years,” convinces her that she “shall never work again” (174). In “Honor Bright” the humor emerges from a shrewd adolescent’s change of heart regarding her personal values: “I was that unpleasant, smug and righteous child who always lives next door to other people’s children, a glittering example to them, the burdock in their panties and the gum in their hair” (16).

In an entirely different vein are the remaining five pieces. Reflecting her contempt for the Volstead Act and its guardianship of public morality, “Our American Almanac and Prophetic Messenger” is a highly inventive and invective piece. Like the genre it burlesques, Millay’s “Almanac” is complete with projected events and their astrological explanations: “The position of Billy Sunday points to much agitation among the heavenly bodies, and forbodes evil
for theatres and places of amusement. The death of many prominent people is indicated, even Royalty may not escape” (32–33). “Two Souls With But a Single Thought,” “Cordially Yours,” and “Art and How to Fake It: Advice to the Art-Lorn” are all letter sketches with Nancy as advice columnist. In the last of these, Millay satirizes the Greenwich Village milieu that she helped to define but ultimately grew tired of; her targets here include faddish restaurants, phony wits, pretentious artists, halfhearted socialist sentiments, and literary editors. The last letter in this series is exemplary in illustrating the number of marks Millay can hit in a brief amount of space:

Dear Miss Boyd: I am Chinese girl, but attend American college, Vassar, and enjoy very much. My room-mate is very nice girl, blue eye, yellow hair, very pretty, but in one fact very peculiar. She insist on decorating room with old awful Chinese screen and picture and little ugly dog and Buddha which is not true god, also old piece of weaving made long time ago all by hand and most uneven by dirty peasant, all thing such as in my country no nice family permit be found in attic. In vain I exhort, O cherished room-mate, behold beautiful American golden-oak rocking chair, behold wonderful miraculous American victrola, behold incomparable American imitation lace, all, all made by machinery and without flaw!—In vain, in vain. She tack up on wall unspeakable object such as my baby-brother could do better, she offend my artistic eye with hideous Chinese teak-wood table atrocity, she break up our friend-ship. Advise me, most honorable Boyd. I am in despair. Signed, Chu Chin Chow. (107–08)

One laughs at the not-so-subtle manipulation of language, but the satire is aimed at the patronizing attitude of the American and her inability to recognize her own ethnocentrism.

The one poem in Distressing Dialogues, a lighthearted spoof called “I Like Americans,” the piece Millay uses to open the collection, is also concerned with cultural differences. Millay suggests that Americans do not have the qualities she dislikes in other nationalities. “Hungarians are nice,” for example, but “their native tongue is like a typewriter in the next room, and every word beginning with the shift-key” (5). Of course Millay’s real target is the provinciality of Americans themselves; after all, they are the only people who “sell their bread hygienically wrapped” (8) and who “either shoot the whole nickel, or give up the bones” (11).

III

In her excellent study of American women’s humor and its cultural context, Nancy A. Walker exposes one of the many dilemmas awaiting the woman who chooses to produce humor: “To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and at the same time to risk alienating those upon whom women are dependent for economic survival” (9). Of the cultural attitudes that concerned Millay, surely none were more insidious than those regarding the rightful place of women. Millay’s satires were produced in the years immediately following 1919; women had been given the vote, but they were still victims of a sexual ideology that valued a woman’s self-renunciation, her chastity, her “goodness.” Like much of her best poetry, Millay’s satire is an effort to dismantle this ideology. She rarely provides interior
glimpses of her characters’ thinking processes, but one easily spots those instances where their logic is superior to that which undergirds the status quo. Even her child characters see through the hypocrisy of a gender-biased morality. The child of “How to Be Happy Though Good” knows for example that virtue is not only its own reward, but also its only reward. She discovers that being bad is synonymous with doing what one wishes to do, so she becomes “tractable” in order to beat the adult guardians of morality at their own game—a tactic that serves her equally well when she herself becomes an adult: “For I have learned that it is more beautiful to be unselfish except as regards things which one wants” (235).

Norman Brittin has suggested that Millay may have “caught something” of her “ironic, mock-heroic tone” from another woman, Dorothy Parker, who wrote in a similar vein in her 1918–19 reviews of plays for Vanity Fair (64). Though Millay never mentions Parker in her correspondence, and though a comparative study would probably reveal that Parker is more consistently caustic, the comparison is still apt: the two were well-known women practicing what was in their time a chiefly male-dominated and authoritarian form of literature. No wonder each expressed some ambivalence about her status as a satirist. Like Millay, Parker wanted to be regarded as a lyric poet; she (along with H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis) sought the status that Millay so quickly attained. Brendan Gill says that Parker was painfully aware that “the praise she bestowed in her reviews would give readers less pleasure than the malicious one-line dismissals for which she was famous . . .” (xxv); and Parker herself acknowledged the difficulty she had in accepting her limitations as a poet: “I was following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers.” When she later abandoned her poems, Parker lamented that no one took note of her “magnificent gesture” (Capron, 75).

Theorists of satire generally agree that a key problem for any satirist is to focus attention on contemporary concerns and yet produce a work that lasts. It would be too simple to claim that either Parker’s or Millay’s satire now seems irrelevant because of its topicality; on the contrary, chauvinism, small-mindedness, egotism, et al., are still with us. Though Millay produced a substantial body of satirical writing over a four-year period, she—like Parker—did not wish to establish herself as a major “wit.” Nonetheless, the early reviews of Distressing Dialogues were full of praise. The Boston Transcript compared her favorably to Robert Leacock and George Benchley, and even Henry Fuller qualified his negative reaction with a reference to “spurts of the inexplicable thing which must be called genius . . .” (180). John Franklin’s piece in The New Statesman is written as a conversation; his review itself underscores the importance of the
dialogue for Millay, and from our current vantage point it also suggests something about the era that helped to produce Distressing Dialogues—a period when people were greatly excited about discussing everything from minor works to the major issues of the day, an era when, as Frederick Hoffman observes, there was little fear of repercussion about expressing ideas of any kind (43).

Some of the highest praise for Millay’s volume of satire came from a fellow satirist, Herman J. Mankiewicz (who also wrote for Vanity Fair), a man whom Ben Hecht once called “the Central Park West Voltaire” (qtd. in Kael, 10). Mankiewicz calls the work “splendid,” “an excellent compilation of cynical humor,” adding that the book itself is funnier than any single passage selected for quotation might indicate. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Mankiewicz, detecting a kindred spirit, says that “the papers here assembled are so delightful that one rather wishes that Miss Millay had seen fit to extend her preface into a pen portrait of the mysterious Mrs. [sic] Boyd.” Mankiewicz seems wrong on only one account. “Mrs. Boyd is primarily a satirist,” he writes, “but with a passion for reform that she may well watch, lest it swallow her.” He refers specifically to “An All-American Almanac and Prophetic Messenger,” a piece he says is “full of bitterly invective satire that is anything but funny and that at moments resembles annoyance, chiefly because of its relentless intensity” (23).

Mankiewicz’s objection aside, it is the relentlessness of a piece like “An All-American Almanac,” the last work published under her pseudonym in Vanity Fair, that allows us to link Millay to H. L. Mencken and other “debunking” satirists, writers whose “humor was not of the sort that celebrated the smiling aspects of American life,” as Edward A. Martin has observed in his fine study of Mencken, but whose subjects were provincialism, puritanism, philistineism, and “the defective language that was the common vehicle of these subjects” (173). These concerns are all central to Millay’s satire and are especially evident in “An All-American Almanac” where her irreverence extends even to St. Paul’s sermon on love to the Corinthians. In this piece Millay quotes from the “Famous speech of Senator Lovejoy to Congress, 1927”: “‘Ladies and Gentlemen: though a woman speak with the tongues of men and of senators, and have not modesty, she has become as sounding zimbarambaphones and tinkling tomatocans!’ ” (31). At the core of her “Almanac,” which I believe represents her full force and development as a satirist, is Millay’s understanding that language, used well, is both subversive and purifying (recall her insistence that the Nancy Boyd pieces, though flippant, would be nonetheless “beautifully written”). It may be that Millay’s distinctive contribution to debunking humor is the poetry that suffuses her satire, a particularly striking example of which is the concluding exhortation of “How to Be Happy Though Good”:

Be ruthless, but don’t be rude. . . . Sin without ostentation. But oh, gentle reader, on those rare occasions when pleasure and virtue coincide, then, for the love of Society, that cross-eyed, harassed Mother of chicks that swim!—come out of hiding, seize a trumpet and a big silk flag, and ride through the city on a waltzing elephant. (238)

Perhaps more than any other reviewer, Katherine Anne Porter understood and articulated the significance of Millay’s “fugitive” pieces. In a review of Distress-
ing Dialogues for the New York Herald Tribune, Porter called Nancy Boyd “the left hand of the poet which flings a brick while the right is setting down a sonnet,” adding that “It is a very Siamese twins of a literary partnership. . . . The poet sings like a thrush in a willow tree, while the imp scouts about thumbing her nose and shouting provocative obscenities in the voice of youth itself, at all things held sacred by decree of heaven” (3–4).

Millay stopped writing her satirical sketches in 1923, the year she married Eugene Boissevain, but she never abandoned her satirical impulse. In fact, the year before her death she targeted T. S. Eliot for an upcoming attack; in a letter to Cass Canfield, June 22, 1949, she writes:

Quite apart from my new poetry of which I was speaking, I have been recently engaged in writing...a satire in verse against T. S. Eliot. . . . In this collection of poems, of which I think there will be about twenty . . . there is nothing coarse, obscene, as there sometimes is in the work of Auden or Pound, and nothing so silly as the childish horsing around of Eliot, when he is trying to be funny. He has no sense of humour, and so he is not yet a true Englishman. There is, I think, in these poems of mine against Eliot nothing which could be considered abusive: they are merely murderous. (Letters, 353)

Millay is a bit unfair here. Eliot was not completely without humor; he himself wrote satirical verse. It is still a loss for us that her satire “against” him was never published. While Millay was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for The Harp Weaver and Other Poems in 1923, the same year Eliot received the Dial prize for The Waste Land, and while both poets had been championed often by the same critics (Ransom, Tate, and Monroe, among others), it was Eliot who became perhaps the most influential poet of the century. Millay was willing to be a pariah if that meant trusting her own convictions. She responded to the same fragmented world that Eliot explored, but as she noted in a late sonnet, she was content to “put Chaos into fourteen lines / And keep him / to deride. / What funny wits these modern wags expose, / For all their versatility; Voltaire, / Who wore to bed a night-cap, and would close, / In fear of drafts, all windows, could declare / In antique stuffiness, a phrase that blows / Still through men’s smoky minds, and clears the air. (CP, 725)

In another late sonnet Millay suggests her amused contempt for poets who revel in obscurity, while expressing her admiration for a more conventional writer who is also one of the world’s great satirists:

It is the fashion now to wave aside
As tedious, obvious, vacuous, trivial, trite.
All things which do not tickle, tease, excite
To some subversion, or in verbiage hide
Intent, or mock, or with hot sauce provide
A dish to prick the thickened appetite;
Straightforwardness is wrong, evasion right;
It is correct, de rigueur, to deride.
What funny wits these modern wags expose,
For all their versatility; Voltaire,
Who wore to bed a night-cap, and would close,
In fear of drafts, all windows, could declare
In antique stuffiness, a phrase that blows
Still through men’s smoky minds, and clears the air. (CP, 725)

Millay would concede that she was no Voltaire. Her satirical sketches are nonetheless central to the aims and preferences of a woman who—like Voltaire—was herself famous for clearing the air.
Works Cited


