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Love Poetry, Women's Bonding and Feminist Consciousness

The Complex Interaction between Edna St Vincent Millay and Adrienne Rich

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ABSTRACT This article examines Adrienne Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems* in relation to Edna St Vincent Millay's *Fatal Interview*. Discussing notions such as lyric voice and innovation within traditional genres, the author analyses how Millay's attempts to challenge commonplace definitions of female sexuality impacted on Rich's articulation of sexual desire. The intertextual dialogue between the above works reveals that Millay and Rich produced two remarkably similar erotic narratives, which resist masculinist conceptions of literary history and comment on the self-referentiality of poetic composition. Finally, the author approaches *Fatal Interview* as a work that foregrounds the significance of women's bonding, and argues that it was precisely this aspect that caught Rich's attention and helped the younger poet develop her feminist consciousness.

KEY WORDS feminist consciousness ♦ literary influence ♦ love poetry ♦ Millay ♦ Rich ♦ women's bonding

Adrienne Rich is a poet particularly popular with European readers; as a postgraduate student in England, I was surprised by the fact that all my female colleagues had studied Rich's work, regardless of their different cultural backgrounds. Her poetry was unanimously pronounced 'original' and 'feminist'. Most of us had a rather naive view concerning the poet's literary predecessors – no other poet seemed 'radical' enough in comparison. Several years after graduation, I still encounter a similar situation, both in the attitudes of my own students and, less predictably, in scholarly analyses of Rich's work. Rich remains equally popular, but

integrated considerations of her predecessors rarely come into play, because scholars are somewhat reluctant to examine figures that do not feature prominently in her essays. Consequently, arguments about Emily Dickinson's or Muriel Rukeyser's impact on Rich tend to be recycled, while early 20th-century poets like H.D. or Edna St Vincent Millay have been largely neglected.¹

It was this partial approach to Rich's work, as well as the implicit glory that surrounds the terms 'original' or 'radical', and the difficulty of defining such terms that provided the incentive for this article. Adrienne Rich is discussed here in comparison with Edna St Vincent Millay – in other words, with a poet whose influence on contemporary women writers has not been adequately explored. Millay may be much less famous, but a detailed analysis of her work reveals her importance within the contexts of radicalism, sexuality and feminist consciousness. I therefore examine Millay's most celebrated sonnet sequence, *Fatal Interview*, in relation to Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems*, and analyse how the younger poet's articulation of sexual desire was partly modelled on the earlier writer's work. Discussing notions such as lyric voice and innovation within traditional genres, I argue that Millay and Rich produced two remarkably similar erotic narratives, which simultaneously attempt to expand commonplace definitions of female sexuality, and comment on the self-referentiality of poetic composition. At the same time and, taking into account the two new biographies of Millay, which give a fuller picture of the poet's intense (including homosexual) relationships with women, I approach *Fatal Interview* as a work that foregrounds the significance of women's bonding. Arguing that Millay was one of the first poets whose work presented women as allies, rather than rivals, I explore how Rich's belief in the social potential of women's bonding, as well as her development of notions like female autonomy and individual selfhood are partly indebted to Millay's work.²

Before going any further, there are three issues that warrant immediate clarification: the choice of Millay as a key influence on Rich, the new biographical evidence about Millay's homosexual connections and the notion of women's bonding. The first one is perhaps the hardest to establish, because many modernist and contemporary feminist writers share the exploration of similar thematic issues, often using identical expressive means as well. What differentiates Millay from poets like Marianne Moore, H.D. or Louise Bogan is her public visibility and the impressive sales of her books, which made her particularly accessible to the younger generations of aspiring poets. Moore was highly esteemed by the literary circles of her time, but she led a rather secluded life that did not quite accord with Rich's conceptualization of the female artist. H.D. is now viewed as the high priestess of women's modernist poetry, but she was based in Europe; a substantial part of her more feminist work was

published posthumously, and she was reclaimed as an influential figure of American modernism relatively late. Louise Bogan, finally, was mostly known as a literary critic and was the least prolific of her contemporaries.

Millay, by contrast, was *the* celebrated female poet of the 1920s and 1930s; she lived in New York, she was a prominent member of Alice Paul's 'National Woman's Party', and she gave many successful reading tours around the US – a profile that comes much closer to Rich's ideal of the woman writer. Academic critics and ordinary readers alike were familiar with her work, and her name was meaningful for several years after her death; as Anne Sexton confessed in the late 1950s, 'two years ago I had never heard of any poet but Edna St. Vincent'.³

This significant confession by a female poet of Rich's own generation highlights the immense literary and cultural impact of the earlier artist; indeed, Sexton was by no means the only mid-century poet influenced by Millay. Adrienne Rich provides an equally rewarding subject of comparison, in the sense that her own references to Millay, if hard to trace, are even more striking. Cheryl Walker, for instance, argues that 'Rich has admitted several times that Millay was an important early influence', and relates an interesting story in which the former quoted to her from memory Millay's poem 'Menses' (Walker, 1991: 214). Considering, however, that this incident took place in 1972 – more than 20 years after the publication of Rich's first volume and just six years before the appearance of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, it is obvious that Millay should be seen not just as an early influence, but also as a continuous influence. Her popularity and accessibility give her precedence over H.D. or Bogan, who also tackled subjects like female autonomy or individual selfhood, and Rich's own comments – albeit voiced in private – cannot be ignored.

As regards the issue of Millay's homosexual connections, the picture is relatively clear: Millay scholars are now provided with more balanced accounts, compared with those of early biographers such as Jean Gould (who dismissed every hint of homosexual eroticism in Millay's life), or critics like Lillian Faderman (who described the poet as a lesbian forced to become heterosexual by the social constraints of the 1920s).⁴ Both Nancy Milford and Daniel Mark Epstein, Millay's most recent biographers, have shown that the poet was indiscriminately promiscuous from the very beginning. She had several relationships with women in the all-female Vassar College and, at the same time, she would take advantage of every college vacation in order to meet various male lovers in New York. Millay retained her strong interest in women throughout her life – occasionally even entertaining with her husband her female ex-lovers. Milford also gives more details about the poet's activities in Paris: during the early 1930s, Millay had temporarily left her husband in order to join her (male) lover, the poet George Dillon, in the French capital. While she was there she paid a few visits to Natalie Barney's legendary lesbian salon on the

Left Bank and, according to one of the other guests, 'she seemed at home', despite the fact that 'no self-respecting American woman would be seen there'.⁵ For all these reasons, I am approaching Millay's poetry from a perspective that recognizes both the poet's openness to different sexual alternatives, and her need to extend and diversify the positions that women could occupy in the expression of desire.

This leads us, naturally enough, to the rather controversial notion of women's bonding, a notion that may appear somewhat dated today, but which was particularly meaningful for Millay and Rich – being associated with the first- and second-wave feminist movement respectively. Definitions of 'bonding' tend to vary, of course, and some of them are, as Diana Fuss argues, too imprecise or ahistorical to be useful epistemologically (Fuss, 1989: 44). Fuss certainly has a point, but I think that, as regards at least the latter part of her argument, there is much room for negotiation, especially since both Millay and Rich seem to have been aware of the pitfalls of ahistorical approaches. My own understanding of this bonding comes quite close to Ernest J. Smith's observation concerning 'the profound sense of the weight of history and of women's embattled position within history' that characterizes both *Fatal Interview* and *Twenty-One Love Poems* (Smith, 1998: 44–9). Edna Millay and Adrienne Rich seem to have been among the first who distrusted romanticized views of the potential power of women's bonding, emphasizing the pivotal role of history in conditioning both the social and the sexual spheres open to women. This is why the foregrounding of women's bonding in their poetry deserves a closer consideration.

Although *Fatal Interview* ostensibly deals with the narration of a heterosexual love affair, the way the poet interrogates normative sexual patterns, focusing on the experiences of different women across historical periods, constitutes an important conceptual innovation on the part of Millay, which struck a responsive chord in Adrienne Rich. Patricia A. Klemans has established that Millay was one of the first poets who explored the potential of women's power (Klemans, 1993: 209), and therefore Rich's call 'for a female bonding that will recognize the strength and diversity of women's powers' (Martin, 1984: 204) should not be examined separately from Millay's ideas. In fact, read within its particular sociocultural context, Millay's poetry precedes Rich's in its radical break with the tradition of women's enforced isolation and its willingness to explore alternative forms of social bonding. My analysis of the interaction between the two poets should therefore be seen both as the textual commentary of a most challenging debate, and as an attempt to expand Millay's significance within the framework of feminist writing.

This emphasis on women's bonding does not mean, however, that *Fatal Interview* is directly analogous to *Twenty-One Love Poems*. Rich's work is primarily addressed to women, both to those who identify sexually as

lesbian, and to the 'lesbian' in every woman.⁶ Millay, by contrast, for all her interest in women, could by no means do the same. Writing in the 1930s, a decade that saw a sharp decline in the publication of women's literary production,⁷ Millay could not afford to alienate the majority of her admirers by restricting herself to a specific type of readership. Furthermore, the dominant ideas of the 1930s about female sexuality and the social dynamics of sexual relationships would not have allowed Millay to make a case for women's bonding outside heterosexuality. The feminist activism of the 1920s and the jubilant atmosphere that followed the emergence of the 'new woman' had largely receded; by the 1930s, Millay was not an active member of any feminist circle, and she knew very well that her work would have to operate within the accepted norms. She attempted to question the dominant sexual patterns by constructing a heterosexual persona that exhaustively examines the stereotypes that govern heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, even this relatively safe strategy created considerable friction among Millay's contemporaries: Klemans has argued that some negative evaluations of *Fatal Interview* were written by female critics who felt that the originality and outspokenness of Millay's persona were antagonistic to the majority of women. Most recently, Epstein has shown that a substantial number of the poet's female readers felt that the poet was striking a pose of superiority (Epstein, 2001: 213–15; Klemans, 1993: 203–4). The poet's intention seems to have been the exploration of the common ground that her speaker and her readers shared with respect to heterosexual oppression, but part of her audience failed to appreciate Millay's point. A more openly disruptive approach, such as female bonding in relation to lesbianism, would have resulted in even more hostile attitudes.

Written more than four decades later, *Twenty-One Love Poems* constitutes precisely the kind of disruption that Millay chose to avoid: Rich examines female bonding outside heterosexuality and, indeed, within lesbianism. Being a prominent member of the radical feminist movement of the 1970s, Rich had to face relatively fewer difficulties in selecting her audience; she had the support of a socially visible community of female readers that would endorse her choice to talk openly about lesbian love. Kevin McGuirk has argued that it was during the 1970s, 'with the development of a positive feminism and an alternative order to the bourgeois marriage', that Rich began to experiment with forms and devices that would transform conventional assumptions regarding the love lyric (McGuirk, 1993: 69). The feminist community of which Rich was part, however, may have facilitated the redefinition of this lyric, but could not protect the poet from accusations related to the controversial appeal of her artistic and political choices. Critical objections against the emerging shift in Rich's poetic scope had begun with works written before the rise of

second-wave feminism; *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* and *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* were received with suspicion or open resentment; *The Dream of A Common Language* (1978), finally (which included *Twenty-One Love Poems* and publicly announced the writer's lesbian identification) caused similar reactions, since it marked the poet's turn to radical feminism. And though it would be misleading to argue that Rich is defined as poet only by her feminism, her emphasis on women's issues has been particularly instrumental in the mixed reception of her work. Liz Yorke reminds us that 'mainstream American literary establishments have been reluctant to claim [Rich], their responses ranging from extreme hostility to mere ambivalence. . . . It is throughout the women's movement worldwide that she is most renowned' (Yorke, 1997: 3).

Though *Fatal Interview* and *Twenty-One Love Poems* were products of very different social circumstances, both were the outcomes of comparably difficult decisions that each poet had to make with respect to articulating subjects such as sexuality, women's bonding and the search for a fulfilling erotic relationship. The emphasis on female bonding and the suspicion (Millay) or rejection (Rich) of heterosexual normativity left both poets open to an almost identically biased level of critical scrutiny, simultaneously showing why these two sequences should be read within the same context.

EDNA ST VINCENT MILLAY'S *FATAL INTERVIEW*

Fatal Interview (1931) is a sequence of 52 sonnets, chronicling the development of an illicit heterosexual affair between a married woman and a much younger man. It is also one of Millay's richest works in literary allusions, ranging from classical mythology to the English Metaphysical poets. The classical element is at times particularly noticeable and several scholars have read the sonnets as Millay's own version of the Selene/Endymion myth. This complex cluster of influences is reflected in Millay's intelligent use of her speaking personae, which alternate from the mythical moon goddess to the modern woman of the 1930s.

This section focuses primarily on Millay's presentation of female selfhood and its relation to women's bonding and artistic creation; in particular, I attempt to demonstrate how the heterosexual affair often assumes a secondary role throughout the sequence, and how Millay's negotiation of a polymorphous sexuality is facilitated by repeated references to other women's erotic experiences. At the same time, the discussion tries to highlight Millay's emphasis on the process of poetic composition and, especially, on the production of a poetics that foregrounds both women's creativity and the female artist's effort to revise the genre of love poetry.

A typical example of Millay's intentions is provided in sonnet XVI:

I dreamed I moved among the Elysian fields,
 In converse with sweet women long since dead;
 And out of blossoms which that meadow yields
 I wove a garland for your living head.
 Danae, that was the vessel for a day
 Of golden Jove, I saw, and at her side,
 Whom Jove the Bull desired and bore away,
 Europa stood, and the Swan's featherless bride.
 All these were mortal women, yet all these
 Above the ground had had a god for guest;
 Freely I walked beside them and at ease,
 Addressing them, by them again addressed,
 And marvelled nothing, for remembering you,
 Wherefore I was among them well I knew. (Millay, 1956: 645)

The presence of these dead women suggests a continuity across time, and the speaker's assertion that she walked beside them 'freely' and 'at ease' reinforces the feeling of solidarity. The speaker's preference for women removed from her both historically and culturally shows that Millay is engaged in a task that anticipates that of Rich in *The Dream of A Common Language*. Millay seems to be equally interested in surveying the field of women's inscription in literature, as well as in the lives of the women she deploys in her work. Her repeated references to these figures are meant to alert the reader to Millay's revisionary intention – the creation of an original female persona whose attitude towards sexuality sees the vindication of other women's experiences as a necessary step for the eradication of silence and prejudice. The last four lines ('wherefore . . . I knew') add a subtle touch of ambiguity, which not only underlines the speaker's affiliation with the women she mentions, but also excludes the man from their special bond. The speaker's admission that 'freely I walked beside them and at ease' provides a sharp contrast to the turbulent relationship with the man and the constant antagonism between the two partners.

Peppe reminds the reader that the three women mentioned here had been seduced by Jove with cunning and deceit; Millay is thus placing her speaker's sexual experience 'on common ground with women who are victims of a male's whims and short-lived sexual desire'. The women are perceived as literary foremothers with whom the speaker can communicate and empathize. Ultimately, 'by affiliating herself with them rather than solely with her beloved, she is able to translate her unfulfilled needs into power' (Peppe, 1998: 58–9). The above argument makes clear that the thematic transparency of the sequence is not a simple matter. Millay cleverly inserts elements that highlight the complexity of her project, a project which is as much concerned with the redefinition of female power

and creativity as it is with rewriting the tradition of love poetry. And the first step towards this redefinition of power lies in the speaker's willingness to consider alternative forms of psychological support, and thus disrupt the traditional dominance of the heterosexual couple in love sonnets. A female speaker who constantly questions the specifics of her relationship, resists popular stereotypes of eternal love and loyalty and sees other women as potential advisors, rather than competitors, distances Millay from contemporaries like Elinor Wylie, simultaneously forcing the reader to review the role of women in the articulation of passion and desire.

The same subjects are taken up in sonnet XXVI:

Women have loved before as I love now;
 At least, in lively chronicles of the past –
 Of Irish waters by a Cornish prow
 Or Trojan waters by a Spartan mast
 Much to their cost invaded – here and there,
 Hunting the amorous line, skimming the rest,
 I find some woman bearing as I bear
 Love like a burning city in the breast.
 I think however that of all alive
 I only in such utter, ancient way
 Do suffer love; in me alone survive
 The unregenerate passions of a day
 When treacherous queens, with death upon the tread,
 Heedless and willful, took their nights to bed. (Millay, 1956: 655)

At a first reading, this sonnet creates the impression that the speaker wishes to distance herself from the collectivity of women; this impression, however, is deceptive, and a closer look shows that it is one of those poems in which Millay's persona identifies with her female sisters most strongly. As Klemans has argued, the speaker refers to the women of the Irish and Trojan coasts because, like Selene, Leda, Danae and Europa, they are the only ones who can understand the nature and intensity of her feeling. Her attempt to embrace, in a single poem, areas removed from each other both geographically and culturally highlights Millay's interest in creating a female continuum across historical periods. This repeated evocation of other women and the speaker's identification with them is arguably an innovative device, technically as well as conceptually, because it is 'unusual in any literature but very rare in love poetry where women are usually portrayed as rivals' (Klemans, 1993: 209). Furthermore, this device operates in a way that precedes Rich's attempts to develop a feminist consciousness by drawing attention to the power of relation among women and its almost complete invisibility from both lyric love poetry and the public sphere. McGuirk's comments on Rich's strategies could have been written for Millay:

Address to historical women can serve a communal function, linking the lyric self to ethical community, for it uses apostrophe's seeming power to raise the dead and to bestow subjectivity in order to bring distant or historical women into the imaginative life of contemporary readers. It thus contributes to the development of a feminist ethos which needs, like any ethos, vivid exemplary figures and a historical dimension. (McGuirk, 1993: 70)

If, in the previous sonnet, Millay had used 'vivid exemplary figures' from Greek mythology in an attempt to emphasize both solidarity and victimization, she now expands the circle even more, and mixes mythology with history. Thus, her Trojan women are linked with those 'of Irish waters by a Cornish prow'. It is interesting to observe that, despite the differences in the choice of the above figures, Millay does not valorize any particular group at the expense of another; this signals her intention to create a transhistorical and transcultural bond that will defy the disturbing hierarchy of the heterosexual duel, which often results in women being 'much to their cost invaded'. The repetition of harsh plosives like /b/ (e.g. 'I find some woman bearing as I bear / Love like a burning city in the breast') accentuates the speaker's empathy, and the imagery suggestive of both passion and destruction restates the speaker's need to find solace in some form of sisterhood with women who have shared similar experiences. Millay, like Rich, recognizes 'the connection, the primary bond, between women, as a source of integrity and strength', and succeeds in disrupting traditional notions of patriarchal love poetry (Oktenberg, 1984: 85). Moreover, bearing in mind the new biographical information that illuminates the poet's lesbian connections, Millay's continuous interrogation of rigid heterosexual patterns, combined with the foregrounding of female bonding, should be read as a conscious argument in favour of women's polymorphous sexuality.

This is not to say that *Fatal Interview* can be read as a lesbian sequence. Despite Millay's repeated references to women, the majority of the sonnets focus on the speaker's relationship with the Endymion figure, the male; at the same time, it would be naive to read the poet's consistent turn to women as a merely technical idiosyncrasy whose only function is to provide a framework of comparison between present and past. Instead, *Fatal Interview* seems to be a good example of Adrienne Rich's description of encoded language, that is to say, language which conceals the extent of women's feelings for each other (see also Dickie, 1997: 145-7). Millay appears to have been interested in addressing women whose sexual experience included non-heterosexual alternatives, and her speaker's turn to historical or mythical figures suggests perhaps a kind of code, aiming at superseding the problems outlined in the heterosexual affair. And though it has to be conceded that Millay seems too reticent at times, we should always remember the restrictive cultural context within which *Fatal*

Interview was produced. Placed in their proper dimensions, Millay's ellipses can be particularly eloquent, precisely because they ask the audience to understand that things not said can be as meaningful as things explicitly stated. Millay wants her audience to read between the lines, identify the hidden anger and frustration, and assume a personal response towards the situation she describes. This demanding reading experience and the inevitable re-evaluation of gender stereotypes are therefore comparable to the strength of Rich's outspoken revisions of gender and power relations: not only do they rely upon similar interpretative strategies, but they also clarify the spiritual affinity regarding the tools with which the revision of gender and power relations can be achieved.

The concluding sonnet returns to the mythological subtext and comments both on the Selene/Endymion story and on the affair of the modern woman:

Oh, sleep forever in the Latmian cave,
 Mortal Endymion, darling of the Moon!
 Her silver garments by the senseless wave
 Shouldered and dropped and on the shingle strewn,
 Her fluttering hand against her forehead pressed,
 Her scattered looks that trouble all the sky,
 Her rapid footsteps running down the west –
 Of all her altered state, oblivious lie!
 Whom earthen you, by lips adored,
 Wild eyed and stammering to the grasses thrust,
 And deep into her crystal body poured
 The hot and sorrowful sweetness of the dust:
 Whereof she wanders mad, being all unfit
 For mortal love, that might not die of it. (Millay, 1956: 681)

Klemans has argued that the Selene/Endymion legend is used to epitomize the difference of perspective between male and female writers. 'Unlike the Keats poem which pities Endymion', she writes, 'Millay's sympathies are with Selene. The Goddess is devastated and wanders over the sky, distraught over losing her love; the Mortal sleeps, oblivious to all the pain and anguish he has caused' (Klemans, 1993: 209–10). Elaborating on this view, Peppe stresses the speaker's contempt for Endymion, who is ordered to sleep forever as Selene goes mad. The modern woman, by contrast, enjoys a completely different fate and emerges from this affair sane and wise. Throughout the sequence, she has been oscillating between submission and proud independence, vulnerability and power; refusing to deceive herself about the inadequacy of her partner, the speaker finally realizes that she is a survivor and that her strength derives from the ability to be true to one's self. This realization makes her strong enough to embark on new adventures and to fight new battles. She escapes from an emotional death 'by converting her hope for a lasting relationship into

self-reliance. Acknowledging her freedom in turn facilitates the rebirth of her own female identity' (Peppe, 1998: 62).

Fatal Interview, however, cannot be reduced to a simple 'consummation/exploitation/rejection' schema, which has been successfully avoided by the modern woman but painfully proven true in the face of Selene. Recent interpretations of Millay's sequence insist that the presence of the goddess serves a crucial purpose, further stressing the relationship between subject matter and poetic composition; as Mary Moore explains:

The goddess's eternally suspended desire . . . makes possible more poems, opens toward future imprisonments, future immortalities. In the sense that this state makes the erotic friction of desire eternal, it is perhaps the ultimate erotic experience, the experience that leads to the iterative production of more poems of desire. . . . By containing this desire within the embodied form of this sonnet, by enunciating the fiction of poetic making and erotic desire, the fictive poet can express, reveal, and escape it. (Moore, 2000: 221)

Such observations offer a fresh perspective to *Fatal Interview* and are fully consonant with the sequence's cyclical pattern of narration; the 52 sonnets represent not just the 52 weeks of the year or the different stages in the development of a love affair, but also the laborious process of poetic composition, which is seen as the completion of a circle that nevertheless remains open to further expansion and revision.

Fatal Interview still occupies a privileged position among Millay's work. Approaches like Jan Montefiore's, which fail to recognize the extent of the poet's innovation, asserting that 'Millay's poems do not question their own terms', do not parody tradition and do not really explore 'the identity of the heroine' (Montefiore, 1987: 124), strike me as too unfair and narrow in scope to account for the consistent appeal of *Fatal Interview*. If anything, the speaker's exhaustive examination of both her own sexuality and of the interpersonal dynamics of heterosexual love sufficiently delineates 'the identity of the heroine', and Millay's determination to argue for the importance of women's bonding, resisting the dominant stereotypes of rivalry and antagonism, constitutes a particularly intelligent parody of the sonnet tradition. Recent critical appreciations insist that Millay did revise the amatory tradition she inherited from the Renaissance and Romantic writers, and that her contribution to the love lyric has been uniquely transgressive. Millay not only created an original female persona, but also renegotiated notions such as female sexuality, physical desire, 'feminine' docility or submission in a manner that signalled the emergence of a new feminist consciousness. Recognizing the poet's achievement, Peppe argues that Millay cannot be fully appreciated merely within the context of a female amatory tradition that would include poets such as Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, Christina Rossetti or Elinor Wylie. Millay, she writes, challenges tradition

... by creating a new type of woman lover who, uninterested in deception, exercises her capacity for rigorous self-examination and takes a critical, realistic view of her male partner. This new female persona is motivated not by a secret need or wish to manipulate, but by a desire to express her sexuality and a tendency toward building and sustaining relationships. (Peppe, 1998: 54-5)

Klemans, finally, celebrates Millay's groundbreaking presentation of 'a feminine viewpoint on love' and the creation of a woman who is 'an initiator, honest and fearless'. 'Today', she writes, 'we have many women poets who are speaking frankly about a woman's nature. In 1931, we had Edna St. Vincent Millay.' Klemans is convinced that Millay 'can speak to the women and men of today as well as to those of the Twenties and Thirties, because her poetry is written with consummate skill and her message of feminine individuality is ageless' (Klemans, 1993: 211).

Rich's debt to Millay becomes therefore very significant because the latter focused on precisely those issues that were to be hailed, a few decades later, as examples of Rich's radical contribution to feminist writing. This extended discussion of *Fatal Interview* demonstrates that it was Millay, rather than Rich, who first attempted to explore matters such as women's inscription in literature, and who associated this problematic inscription with one-dimensional, male-dominated representations of female sexuality. Furthermore, it was Millay's rigorous examination of the lives of mythical women that contributed to the development of a new feminist ethos and drew Rich's attention to the importance of relations among women. Finally, it was Millay's revision of the tradition of lyric love poetry and her insistence on pointing out the limited recognition of female creativity that triggered Rich's quest for 'a common language', a language that would do full justice to the extent and diversity of women's artistic visions.

ADRIENNE RICH'S TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS

The message of feminine individuality may have produced a warm response in Adrienne Rich, but the medium within which this message was voiced is no less important. Given that *Twenty-One Love Poems* appeared when Rich had already established herself as a radical woman poet, her turn to the more traditional genre of lyric poetry requires special attention. McGuirk argues that the deployment of lyric forms by a contemporary poet is usually regarded as a 'regressive activity', because 'lyric' tends to represent, for literary criticism, 'a belated poetic mode'. He insists, however, that a 'highly politicized poet' like Rich must be read within a framework that recognizes lyric 'as an ideological practice': *Twenty-One Love Poems*, he writes,

... presents a ... conflicted negotiation between identity and difference, poetry and the world. ... It seeks to place the individual lyric poet in a wider human context, but here this means opening the intimate space of the love lyric to social and literary contexts. (McGuirk, 1993: 61–3)

McGuirk's description of Rich's effort is certainly perceptive; nevertheless, it must be remembered that, as Debra Fried and more recent scholars like Joseph Aimone have shown, Millay was perhaps the first American woman poet ever to revise and modernize lyric forms in a way that promoted a visible politics of female individuality and social activism. *Fatal Interview* occupies a privileged place in this context, and Rich's deployment of a sequence in *Twenty-One Love Poems* suggests that, like Millay, she was not afraid of being accused of regression or conservatism. The earlier poet had given the younger one a good example of how she could utilize a controversial poetic terrain without falling into such traps.

Twenty-One Love Poems, however, parallels *Fatal Interview* in many other ways, one of them being Rich's use of classical myth. Rich turns to the story of Philoctetes, the wounded archer who was abandoned by the Greeks on an uninhabited island, but was later retrieved when an oracle informed the Greeks that Troy could not be taken without him. This story of wounding and healing serves as the central motif in Rich's sequence; just as Millay employs the 'unconscious man' motif central in the Endymion myth 'to emphasize men's inability to respond to women's needs', presenting Selene as the embodiment of a self-destructive behaviour that the modern woman decides not to adopt, Philoctetes stands for an example of victimization and self-incrimination that Rich wants to leave behind her (Peppe, 1998: 53–4; Smith, 1998: 48–9).

The thematic differences between the two works have already been acknowledged; Rich's sequence concentrates on a lesbian affair, while Millay's narrative, for all its intricate manipulations of normative heterosexual patterns, retains its strong heterosexual attachments. Nevertheless, even though the *Twenty-One Love Poems* have been widely recognized as a 'coming out' statement, several critics caution us against separating Rich's experiential content from literary works that belong in the same genre – the love sequence. Montefiore, for instance, believes that, while the lesbian element should not be overlooked, 'it does not follow that the language or form of the poetry is specifically female' (Montefiore, 1987: 166–7). Along the same lines, Margaret Dickie characterizes Rich's language as 'borrowed, not new, ... blur[ring] the distinction between same-sex sex and different-sex sex'. Without undermining Rich's exploration of the 'strange vitality' of lesbian eroticism, Dickie argues that, ultimately, 'what Rich celebrates is the woman alone, the "forms" in which she finds herself not in union or communion with someone else' (Dickie, 1997: 150–3). Millay's speaker in *Fatal Interview* was clearly engaged in the same task.

Already from the opening sonnet, it becomes clear that a comparison with the earlier poet may yield some interesting results:

No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city. (Rich, 1978: 25)

The sentence 'no one has imagined us' suggests that the poet is prepared to narrate an unconventional story, the story of two women who are in love with each other. Just as Millay's speaker had declared, in sonnet II of *Fatal Interview*, that 'the scar of this [adulterous] encounter' will lie 'like a sword' between herself and her husband, Rich is determined to uncover the scars and blossoms involved in her different, lesbian encounter, which will also lie like a sword between herself and a society that has so far prevented lesbian women from verbalizing their experience, refusing even to imagine them. Furthermore, the poet asserts that she will be celebrating what she calls her 'animal passion'; her linguistic choice here is particularly bold, reminding the reader of Millay's 'beast' that 'rends' the speaker of *Fatal Interview*. Throughout the sequence, Rich's approach towards physical desire is presented in a way that mirrors Millay, both as regards outspokenness and rejection of sentimental idealizations, and as regards the recognition that the mind cannot be seen as a higher abstraction completely separated from the body and its needs. At regular intervals, Rich also returns to Millay's opening image in *Fatal Interview*, that is to say, to 'this beast that rends me in the sight of all / this love, this longing, this oblivious thing' (Rich, 1978: 631). In poem 10, for instance, she writes: 'I find . . . only my own animal thoughts: / that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort, / that voices of the psyche drive through the flesh / further than the dense brain could have foretold' (Rich, 1978: 29–30). Again, Rich's 'animal thoughts' constitute a warm response to the earlier poet and a full endorsement of Millay's notion of erotic attraction. Poem 7, which opens with the lines: 'What kind of beast would turn its life into words? / What atonement is this all about? / – and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living', is another typical case in point. Like Millay, who experiments with her speaker's position as subject and object of her own discourse, consistently portraying the struggle involved in any sort of artistic creation, Rich is concerned with 'how the discourse of love can also probe and question its own conventions', problematizing poetic composition as both atonement and guilt (see also McGuirk, 1993: 71).

Poem 2 expands on this preoccupation with writing and the place of women in the expression of desire:

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,

you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
 our friend the poet comes into my room
 where I've been writing for days,
 drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
 and I want to show her one poem
 which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
 and wake. You've kissed my hair
 to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem,*
I say, a poem I wanted to show someone . . .
 and I laugh and fall dreaming again
 of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
 to move openly together
 in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
 which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.
 (Rich, 1978: 25)

Smith argues that the opening sentences and the way they evoke 'post-coital imaginative suspension' betray Millay's influence; the latter's sonnet XVI ('I dreamed I moved among the Elysian fields') provides a direct analogy in this respect (Smith, 1998: 50). An equally important link can be found in the expression of each poet's feelings; Millay, for instance, wants to share her excitement about her lover with other 'sweet women' and dreams of being part of an all-female circle which appreciates her portrayal of him as a special product of (her) art. Speaker and beloved object are construed as occupying 'an intermediate ground between the real and the mythic', therefore partaking of the immortality granted to exceptional artistic creations (Epstein, 2001: 213–14). Similarly, Rich construes her lover as a unique artistic product that has to be shared with 'our friend the poet' and recognized as exceptional; poetic composition and sexual longing are interrelated in both sequences. Rich's articulation of 'the desire to show you to everyone I love, / to move openly together' echoes Millay's celebration of erotic passion. At the same time, Rich realizes that the open movement she longs for 'is not simple', and she voices this realization with words that parallel Millay's diction in sonnet I of *Fatal Interview*. The older poet's speaker had acknowledged that the intensity and complexity of her feelings could 'clog her flight', and had therefore hastened to command her 'feathers' to climb again 'the dustless air'; likewise, Rich talks about 'the pull of gravity . . . / which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air', commenting not only on the difficulty of sustaining a fulfilling erotic relationship, but also on the centripetal force of society which privileges uniformity and submission to heterosexual patterns that she and her lover have rejected.

The Philoctetes poem is another example that depicts the conceptual affinity between the two poets:

I can see myself years back at Sunion,
 hurting with an infected foot, Philoctetes
 in woman's form, limping the long path,
 lying on a headland over the dark sea, . . .
 imagining the pull of that water from that height,
 knowing deliberate suicide wasn't my métier,
 yet all the time nursing, measuring that wound.
 Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished
 her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.
 I love the scar tissue she handed on to me,
 but I want to go on from here with you
 fighting a temptation to make a career of pain. (Rich, 1978: 28–9)

Rich's personification of Philoctetes as a contemporary woman is directly analogous to Millay's use of the Selene/Endymion myth. Both poets focus on suffering in order to analyse the alternatives of behaviour available to women from antiquity to the present, radicalizing 'the lyric mode in the service of a feminist poetics and politics' (McGuirk, 1993: 66). Rich's sonnet combines beautiful imagery with moving directness, and the speaker's determination to leave behind Philoctetes's victimization in the final lines provides a most appropriate ending. Like the modern woman of *Fatal Interview*, who rejected Selene's self-incrimination and emphasized the emergence of a new, stronger selfhood, the female Philoctetes here refuses to cherish her suffering and decides not to 'make a career of pain'. As Gertrude Reif Hughes puts it, 'women who love women must identify the injuries but refuse to be the injured party'.⁸ Rich's statement in the end ('I am her descendant') pays tribute to poets who refused to make a career out of female victimization. Millay is clearly among the poets who deserve this accolade.

The concluding poem calls for special attention:

The dark lintels, the blue and foreign stones
 of the great round rippled by stone implements
 the midsummer night light rising from beneath
 the horizon – when I said 'a cleft of light'
 I meant this. And this is not Stonehenge
 simply nor any place but the mind
 casting back to where her solitude,
 shared, could be chosen without loneliness,
 not easily nor without pains to stake out
 the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light.
 I choose to be a figure in that light,
 half-blotted by darkness, something moving
 across that space, the color of stone
 greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
 a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle. (Rich, 1978: 35–6)

The poet foregrounds her new sense of selfhood by evoking the same symbols used by Millay – solid rocks (stability), moon (femininity) and movement towards the light (spiritual rebirth). Judith McDaniel writes that Rich has developed the ability ‘to choose solitude “without loneliness”, and to define one’s own sphere of action and growth’. The choice ‘is of a process, a way of becoming, rather than a narrowly defined end’.⁹ Emphasizing her status as poet and the power of the female mind, Rich redirects the reader’s attention to the importance of artistic composition. The drawing of the circle, at the end, signals both the completion of this story and the ever-expanding potential for new poems of desire; as Cary Nelson puts it, Rich leaves the sequence ‘with a project unfinished and perhaps still to come’,¹⁰ an argument that again brings to mind the corresponding conclusion of *Fatal Interview*. Indeed, in its detailed analysis of selfhood, bonding and identity in relation to somebody else, in its rejection of defeatism and self-incrimination, in its examination of women’s place within (literary) history and in its determination to foreground the female artist’s revision of traditional myths and poetic genres, *Twenty-One Love Poems* can be seen as a continuation of *Fatal Interview*.

Reading earlier assessments of Millay’s work, one gets the feeling that contemporary and second-wave feminist critics were a bit harsh on the poet; the implicit assumption is that she failed to take some of her ideas a step further, and become the undisputed spokesperson of American feminist poetry in the first decades of the last century. New scholars, however, point out that Millay should not be denigrated for what she failed to do, but should be given credit for what she achieved: opening up the thematic and expressive field of women’s writing; exploring the relationship between poetry and the public role of the female artist; drawing attention to the artificial construction of femininity; and raising feminist awareness by extending the positions that women could occupy in the expression of desire. Despite her unquestionable radicalism and daring approach to sexuality and the construction of selfhood, Adrienne Rich cannot be studied independently of earlier 20th-century poets like Edna St Vincent Millay. Placed within the particular sociocultural context of the 1930s, Millay’s contribution to the above issues appears equally important. In fact, it could be argued that it was Millay’s artistic practices – in other words, her versatility, her determination to revise poetic moulds that enjoyed little esteem among her contemporaries, her emphasis on female creativity and her insistence on demanding the recognition of women’s polymorphous sexuality – that helped the younger poet shape her radical insights. Millay clearly provided Rich with the material she needed for her own contribution to feminism and feminist literature, and the distinguished way in which the younger poet used this material commemorates her predecessor in the best possible way.

NOTES

1. A relatively recent notable exception would be Sabine Sielke's (1997) *Fashioning the Female Subject*.
2. For a detailed analysis of Millay's impact on another aspect of Rich's work – her political poetry – see also Michailidou (2003).
3. Cited in the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Gilbert and Gubar, 1996: 1501).
4. See Jean Gould's (1969) *The Poet and Her Book* and Lillian Faderman's (1992) *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.
5. See Milford (2001: 302, 363–4, 104–33, 157, 350–1, 372–9); see also Epstein (2001: 76–137).
6. See 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (Rich, 1980) and 'It Is the Lesbian in Us' (Rich, 1995: 199–202). Although Millay would not have endorsed Rich's definition of the 'lesbian' as 'the self-chosen woman', she was certainly willing to explore 'the primary intensity between women', and examine how women could disrupt patriarchal normativity – both as regards sexuality and artistic creation.
7. See William Drake's excellent analysis of the diminishing numbers of poetry books published by American women in the 1930s, as well as the limited numbers of awards given to female poets in *The First Wave* (Drake, 1987: 386–7).
8. See Gertrude Reif Hughes, 'On *Twenty-One Love Poems*'; at: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/21love.htm
9. See Judith McDaniel, 'On *Twenty-One Love Poems*'; at: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/21love.htm
10. See Cary Nelson, 'On *Twenty-One Love Poems*'; at: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/21love.htm

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