Between the Lines: The Clothing of Edna St. Vincent Millay

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Abstract

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As a poet and playwright, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was one of the most famous women in America during her lifetime. This thesis examines Millay's public and private personas as well as her relationship to homosexuality and heterosexuality, through the veil of her clothing. Millay was a complex person but if one only looks at her biography and not her clothing, one can argue she was quite a radical bohemian. However, in her private life, Millay's writing and clothing reveal that she lived life following her passions, whereas in her public persona she was significantly more restrained within a conventional presentation. The separation Millay makes between her public and private lives, is made abundantly clear through her choice of clothing. As part of this thesis I have therefore, recreated, with video documentation of the process, two distinct ensembles worn by Millay. The first ensemble looks at Millay's public persona in a fashionable and feminine tan linen dress from the most widely circulated image of her, taken by Arnold Genthe in 1914. The second ensemble is from a photograph taken by Berenice Abbott in 1925 that shows Millay with a bobbed haircut in a man's shirt and tie, and a woman's suit. This ensemble was chosen for the photograph that would appear in her first book after becoming the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923. Perhaps this more masculine presentation was her way of holding her own among the previous all male recipients. A study of Millay's clothing offers valuable insights not only into how she chose to present herself to the world, revealing her desires, preferences, politics and nuanced aspects of her personality, but also how she chose to incorporate and respond to the culture and times as these changed over her lifetime.

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Finally I dedicate this work to my parents without whom, for many reasons, this would never have happened.

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Introduction

From the moment of birth, we are enveloped by fabric. When a person sheds their clothing in order to wash or to go to bed, it is generally understood to be a temporary condition. Indeed, the enduring condition of human existence is to be clothed in a second skin of textiles. I believe that what a person chooses to wear can reveal nuanced aspects of their inner being along with clues as to how these choices incorporate external cultural and temporal influences that form their surrounding environment. In this thesis, I am studying a specific individual, using their clothing as the primary lens of investigation.[1]

My subject is American poet and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950). This study will allow insights not only into how she chose to present herself to the world, revealing her desires, preferences, politics and nuanced aspects of her inner being, but also how she chose to incorporate and respond to the culture and times as these changed over her lifetime. The dramatic changes in western culture during these years can be traced through the changes in the material culture of clothing — particularly women's clothing. Women's clothing provides a useful historical record since, unlike men's clothing, fashions change drastically year by year and decade by decade. From accounts in letters, Millay was very attentive to the clothes she wore, making her an excellent candidate for this kind of study. Her life straddled the turn of the 20th century, two world wars, the Wright brothers first flight, and women's suffrage in the United States. During this time women's clothing underwent similarly unprecedented changes. For example, America's first national beauty standard for women, the end of the physical corset, and the social acceptability of women wearing trousers, to name just a few of the many historic changes.

In the preface of his book, *Interpretive Biography,* Norman Denzin writes, "I define the biographical method as studied use and collection of life documents, or documents of life, which describes turning-point moments in individuals' lives. These documents will include autobiographies, biographies, diaries, letters, obituaries, life histories, life stories, personal experience stories, oral histories, and personal histories."[2] This study of Millay's clothing is a form of biography using life documents, in this case clothing, previously unstudied. In their 2019 book, *The Pocket*, academics in the history of dress from the UK and France, Barbara Burman and Ariane Fenntaux explain, "…it is only fairly recently that the surge in interest in material

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[1] As part of my course work I undertook three directed studies. One with committee member Aaron Macintosh where I wove a four-meter long piece of fabric based on Millay's poem The Plaid Dress quoted at the end of this thesis. The other two studies were done with committee member pk langshaw. One focused on recreating clothing of the New Woman in the 1910s, and the other was based on what a civilian woman employee would have worn at Bletchley Park between 1941-1945. The second of these, in particular, informed parts of my final thesis documentation as it was the first time I experimented with video as a medium for recording and discussing the making process. The New Women research was also helpful in finding sources to cite for the making of clothing in the 1910s. I'm very grateful to both professors langshaw and Macintosh for their time, feedback and expertise with these directed studies.

[2] Norman K. Denzin, Preface, *Interpretive Biography*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc., 1989), 7.

culture has brought historians to expand their traditional sources to encompass objects."[3] Within this thesis I am expanding the traditional definition of a biographical life document to include clothing.

My methodology includes the reconstruction of clothing in original practice, using the techniques, tools, and machines proper to the time, to allow for a more thorough exploration of the material culture of women's clothing during these years of cultural change. As part of this exploration two ensembles from different periods in Millay's lifetime will be recreated. One more feminine, here meaning skirts and dresses, and the other more masculine, meaning suit and tie. Fashion historian Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell writes in the introduction to her book, *Skirts: Fashioning Modern Femininity in the Twentieth Century,* "Dresses have long been synonymous with femininity in Western culture."[4] She also discusses how the term "skirts" began in the 15th century, a slang term for women.

The first ensemble I made is a dress from 1914 shown in the iconic photograph taken by Arnold Genthe of Millay among magnolia blossoms (Fig. 1). The second is a suit, shirt, and skirt featured in a 1925 publicity photo for a new volume of poetry, taken by Berenice Abbott. (Fig. 2) These ensembles are made to fit me as I can therefore offer additional comments on what it is like to wear the clothing.

While wearing the clothing it is important to remember I can only approach this through a contemporary lens. My history and relationship with clothing is that of someone born in 1997, not 1892. Any conclusions I draw must be caveated appropriately. While discussing gender roles in the late victorian period, Peter G. Filene wrote in 1986, "Late-twentieth-century Americans do not interpret experience in the same terms as people did a hundred years ago. Like tourists in a foreign country, we must try to understand women of Victorian culture in their own terms rather than ours. It is easy to pity or attack their situation it is harder and more instructive to comprehend how they dealt with it."[5] This approach can also be applied to conclusions drawn from historical recreations.

Something I am often asked by people who have never worn historical clothing is, "Is it comfortable." While it may seem like a straightforward question, it is not. I always answer, you need to redefine what you consider comfortable. A historical garment will never be like a pair of elasticated sweatpants, because it is clothing that is made to fit you exactly. Some examples of this include: A non-stretch waistband that is exactly your waist measurement; a corset that over time has been shaped to your exact torso; a skirt that was hemmed to your precise height. When

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[3] Barbara Burman and Ariane Fenntaux, Introduction, *The Pocket, A Hidden History of Women's Lives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 14.

[4] Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, Introduction, *Skirts: Fashioning Modern Femininity in the Twentieth Century*, (Macmillan, 2022), 10.

[5] Peter G. Filene, I End of the Victorian Era (1890-1919), *Him/Her/Self, Sex Roles in Modern America,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 13.

wearing historical garments, one needs to try and set aside what one considers comfortable in a modern sense, and think about the historical construction of clothing. This is why making the clothing in original practice is so important. The act of patterning, sewing and fitting the clothing helps in the understanding of why it fits a certain way and how one wears it.

I will begin with a biographical summary of Millay gleaned from the study of nine biographical texts published from 1951 to 2017. This body of biographical literature is a substantial part of the source material for this thesis. Of particular note are: *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed* (2001) by poet and dramatist Daniel Mark Epstein who accessed Millay's file at the Library of Congress; and *Restless Spirit* (1962) by historian and biographer Miriam Gurko who exchanged many letters with Millay's first male lover, Floyd Dell. In my opinion the closest one to a complete biography is *Savage Beauty* by American biographer Nancy Milford. Milford was given access to all of Millay's papers by Millay's sister Norma. No other biographer has had access to these papers. Milford also interviewed Norma and others close to Millay. Norma was notoriously protective of Millay's legacy and reputation so granting Milford access as she did allowed for the only truly thorough biography to be written. Other biographies acknowledge they are not complete because of the lack of access to these papers.[6] Through this resource material I will additionally examine Millay's relationship with sex, masculinity and femininity, and how her choice of clothing reflects these relationships as indicated in letters and diary entries.

The two recreated ensembles are discussed partly in writing and partly through the use of thorough construction videos (linked in the text) showing the making and wearing of this clothing. Video, as a format is ideal for seeing, following, and understanding the construction process. When it is explained solely though text the process becomes very tedious and hard to follow even when accompanied with still images. When one can actually see a fully narrated and detailed illustration through a recording of the construction, it makes the historical recreation process much easier to access. This is also why the research creation approach has been adopted in this thesis, as it adds essential material that can clarify what lies beyond the ability of what a strictly text based historical analysis can offer.

When we read about other people, we often seek, even unintentionally, things in their stories that we can relate to. The recreation of physical clothing provides a further means of relational connection and conceptual access. Without meaning to, when wearing the clothing I ask myself,

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[6] The biographies consulted, by date of publication are: V*incent at Vassar* (1951) by Millay's latin teacher and friend Elizabeth Hazelton Haight. In author Max Eastman's *Great Companions* (1959) there is a chapter, "My Friendship with Edna Millay." Eastman knew Millay in her years in Greenwich Village and afterwards. As mentioned above, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1962) by Miriam Gurko. Author Jean Gould wrote *The Poet and Her Book: A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1969). Millay's friend and author Vincent Sheean reminisces on time spent with Millay in Greenwich Village and her houses in upstate New York and Maine in, *The Indigo Bunting: A Memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1973). *Millay in Greenwich Village* (1975) is written by literary scholar Anne Cheney. Cheney titles each chapter after a different man who Millay had romantic relationships. Also mentioned above, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2001) by Daniel Mark Epstein. In my opinion the most complete biography of Millay is *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2001) by Nancy Milford. Finally, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2017) are letters and memoirs written by Floyd Dell published by his granddaughter Jeri Dell.

how do I relate to this? When I first read a biography of Millay I found very little I related to. In fact, I did not like Millay as a person. The process of recreating her clothing and then wearing it has made her less of a distant character and more of a real person. Understanding someone through a series of quotes offers a different experience as compared to wearing their clothing. The experience of wearing the clothing adds subtle layers of embodied understanding of Millay's life circumstances, desires and choices, that go beyond words and fill-out Millay's story.

To avoid confusion as to who I am referring to, Edna St. Vincent Millay, who throughout her life was often called Vincent, will be referred to as Millay. Her sisters Norma, and Kathleen, her mother Cora, father Henry and husband Eugen Boissevain will be referred to by their first names.

Who was Edna St. Vincent Millay?

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Rockport, Maine February 22 1892.[7] Her mother Cora Buzzell and her father Henry Tollman Millay were married March 17th 1889. Millay was given the name St. Vincent after the hospital in New York City where Cora's brother's life was saved, just before her birth.[8] When Millay was a few weeks old the family moved to Union, Maine. Her younger sisters Norma and Kathleen Millay were born December 28th 1893 and May 19th 1896, respectively. Henry, who was unable to hold down a job, was evicted by Cora while Millay was still young. He never returned but occasionally sent the girls money, though not enough to live on. The divorce testimony cited "bitter abuse" from Henry towards Cora.[9]

In 1904 Cora moved the girls to Camden, Maine and took a job as a traveling nurse taking cases wherever someone would pay her to care for the sick in their own homes. Millay was twelve, Norma eleven, and Kathleen nine. Daniel Mark Epstein writes "The sisters had to grow up fast."[10] This was especially true for Millay, as the eldest. Cora would send money home to the girls and left Millay in charge of the house and her younger sisters. There is a schedule that survives in Millay's handwriting, titled "Do it Now", dictating what each sister would do throughout the day, each completing household and school related tasks.[11]

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[7] Daniel Mark Epstein, Part 1, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001) 4.

[8] Ibid., 14.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 10.

[11] Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 51.

Millay attended Camden High School graduating "with her class, in June 1909, in a white lawn dress made by her Aunt Sue."[12] Since age eleven in 1904, she had been writing poems and publishing them in the St Nicholas League, a monthly illustrated magazine for children. Many of her childhood poems were printed, some winning prizes.[13] Cora taught her daughters Shakespeare and how to sing in harmonies and always encouraged them to perform.[14] Millay acted in professional plays in Camden during this time and was highly praised, perhaps discovering, for the first time, the power of her speaking voice, a voice that would hold much power over others throughout the following years.[15] Millay was 5'1" with red hair.

At age nineteen, Millay travelled to Kingman, Maine to look after her father Henry, who they thought was dying, although he eventually recovered. On this trip she was free of the restraints of domestic life for the first time in her life. She loved this freedom. Her mother and sisters begged for letters, and eventually asked her to return home. Millay did not want to go back home. Eventually Cora lured her home with the temptation of *The Lyric Year*, a 1912 publication of the best poetry in America that year. Both Millay and Cora submitted pieces and Millay's great poem *Renascence* was selected. One of the judges, Ferdinand Earle began a letter correspondence with her essentially promising that she would win the first prize of five-hundred dollars, much needed by the Millay family. Millay and Earle, who was married with a child, began an emotional affair through these letters. Eventually Earle's wife found out and the letters ceased. Millay also did not win any prize at all, placing fourth. *Renascence* however caused a wave across America, being hailed by readers of *The Lyric Year*, including the winners of the prizes, as the best poem in the publication. One winner even writing that the money he had received was hers anytime she wanted to claim it.[16] The publication of *Renascence* also began two friendships, with Witter "Hal" Bynner (1881-1968) and Arthur Davidson Ficke (1883-1945), that would prove extremely important to the rest of Millay's life.[17] They wrote her a joint letter to which she responded, informing them that she was in fact a woman of twenty and not a man of forty which they had assumed from reading her poem. Both Bynner and Ficke had poems published in *The Lyric Year*. In a letter dated April 12, 1913 to Ficke, Millay refers to him as her Spiritual Advisor, a title he would hold for her for the rest of their lives.[18]

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[12] Daniel Mark Epstein, Part 1, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001), 25.

[13] Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 6-9.

[14] Miriam Gurko, The Sense of Hearing, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 25.

[15] Vincent Sheean, *The Indigo Bunting: A Memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Schocken, 1973) 15.

[16] Miriam Gurko, The Lyric Year, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 46.

[17] Ibid., 48.

[18] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., II College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 38.

While Millay's poetry was gaining notoriety with other American poets and writers, she was still a young woman stuck in a small town in Maine. In the summer of 1912, Norma took a job as a waitress at the Whitehall Inn, in Camden.[19] One evening, a party was held for staff and Norma brought Millay along to sing and recited her poems. She recited *Renascence,* so thoroughly impressing one of the hotel guests in the audience, Miss Caroline Dow, that when Dow returned to New York, she raised funds among her wealthy friends for Millay to attend college. Millay chose to attend Vassar over Smith College as many Maine girls attended Smith.[20]

She began at Vassar, hating the rules and regulations imposed by the school.[21] Elizabeth Hazleton Haight, a Latin Professor at Vassar wrote: "A woman's college in 1917 had many social rules and their infringement carried penalties."[22] Millay was involved with theatre and had her own plays produced by the school. According to Haight, Millay gained tremendous popularity within the student body with her acting and writing. She often ran into disciplinary problems for not following the rules. An illicit outing with friends in 1917 was the final straw and she was barred from attending convocation and graduating with her class; instead her diploma would be shipped to her. However, vigorous lobbying from her classmates prevailed and Vassar eventually allowed her to graduate with her class.[23]

After graduation in 1917 she moved to Greenwich Village in New York City hoping to pursue acting, with the help of actress Edith Wynne Matthison whom she had met while at Vassar. Her first book of poems was published in the same year by Michell Kennerly. She published poems in the left-wing magazines *The Masses* and later *The Liberator,* both run by Floyd Dell (1887-1969), Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) and Max Eastman (1883-1969). Dell and Wilson each proposed marriage and both were refused. She began acting and eventually directing her own plays at the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village.[24]

Millay eventually brought Norma and Kathleen to Greenwich Village and a little later Cora. They would hold parties with each sister holding court in different rooms, with Cora moving between them. At this time Millay was supporting the whole family with her writing, except for Kathleen who was attending Vassar with money raised, again, by Caroline Dow. Kathleen and

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[19] The Whitehall is still a working Inn today.

[20] Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 79.

[21] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., II College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 48.

[22] Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, *Vincent at Vassar*, (Poughkeepsie: Vassar Alumnae Magazine, 1951) , 3.

[23] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., II College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 67.

[24] Nancy Milford, Greenwich Village: Bohemia, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 157.

Norma would marry first, Kathleen to Howard Young and Norma to Charles Ellis, a painter. Upon marriage, all of the sisters continued to use Millay as their last name.

Millay had a brief affair with Arthur Ficke in 1917 when they finally met in person after years of correspondence. They had three days together before he was sent to France during World War I. Floyd Dell later wrote in his memoir of Millay, "Arthur and Edna fell visibly in love."[25] Ficke later met Gladys Brown, a painter whom he married. He and Millay remained close friends for the rest of his life.

In the late 1910s and early 1920s Millay's poems grew in popularity. Vincent Sheean a friend and biographer quotes after the publication of her second volume of poetry, *A Few Figs From Thistles* (1920), when she, "awoke one morning to find herself famous."[26]

In early 1921, she sailed for Paris to write. She was commissioned by *Vanity Fair* to write prose under a pen name, Nancy Boyd. They offered to pay her more to publish everything under her own name however she wanted to preserve "Edna St. Vincent Millay" exclusively for poetry. [27] She lived in Paris and travelled Europe writing. Millay brought Cora out to Paris to live with her. Nancy Milford claims that Millay became pregnant in Paris and she and Cora left for England where Cora helped to abort the baby using herbs from the herbalist volume by Nicholas Culpepper (1616-1654). This illustrates the extent to which Nancy Milford was able to penetrate Millay's life. Miriam Gurko, for instance, in her 1972 biography, suggests that during this time in England, Millay "was having intestinal trouble, brought on, perhaps by the bad food and general neglect of her health in Albania and postwar Vienna and Hungary."[28]

Returning to America late 1923, Millay, with her younger sisters married, now considered herself an old maid.[29] Millay would soon meet and shorty thereafter marry, Eugen Jan Boissevain (1880-1949), a dutch coffee importer who had previously been married to the suffragist Inez Milholland who died tragically young in 1917. Eugen was not intimidated by his wife being more influential than himself. They married in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, July 18th, 1923. Millay was ill and entered the hospital the next day for an operation for appendicitis and a

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[25] Jeri Dell, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Glenmere Press, 2017), 82.

[26] Vincent Sheean, Habitat, *The Indigo Bunting: A Memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Schocken, 1973), 125.

[27] Nancy Milford, "Paris is Where the 20th Century Was", *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 204.

[28] Miriam Gurko, Europe, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 147.

[29] Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 244-247.

twisted intestine.[30] She wrote at the time of her marriage, "If I die now, I shall be immortal."[31] Miriam Gurko wrote, "Eugen took care of everything. He gave up his business to devote himself to Edna…. [Eugen] insisted upon relieving her of every kind of domestic responsibility, saying that a lyric poet must not have her sensitivity dulled by the routine details of house work."[32]

Millay won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923, the first woman to ever win, for her poem *Ballad of the Harp Weaver*. In 1925 Millay and Eugen would buy Steepletop, a working farm in Austerlitz, New York.[33] They lived there on and off for the rest of their lives. They often entertained friends and guests, playing tennis on their court near the house and swimming naked in the sunken pool in the garden.[34]

In 1925 Millay was approached by American composer, Deems Taylor to write the libretto for his new opera, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera. "No American opera had been produced by the Metropolitan since 1917, the native composers began to complain that they were being unfairly discriminated against."[35] She wrote *The Kings Henchmen*, based on Anglo-Saxon mythology. The opera premiered in February 17th, 1927 to huge success.[36]

Additionally in 1927 Millay became involved in the Sacco and Vanzetti case. The two Italian immigrant anarchists were accused of murder and sentenced to death. Many believed that they were wrongly accused and targeted for speaking little to no English and for their anarchist beliefs. Millay joined a picket line in Boston and was arrested for 'sauntering and loitering' and was bailed out by Eugen. She also spoke to the governor of Massachusetts urging him to stay the execution. Both of these efforts were unsuccessful and Sacco and Vanzetti were executed.[37]

It is at this time she had one significant romantic relationship outside of her marriage. This was with the poet George Dillon, 14 years her junior, whom she met in late 1928. The sonnets in her book *Fatal Interview* (1931) were supposedly based on their relationship.[38]

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[30] Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 115.

[31] Ibid., 270-271.

[32] Miriam Gurko, Steepletop and Ragged Island, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 165-166.

[33] Nancy Milford, Love and Fame, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 274.

[34] Ibid., The Great Tours, 390.

[35] Miriam Gurko,The King's Henchman, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 173.

[36] Ibid., 175.

[37] Nancy Milford, Love and Fame, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 297-298.

[38] Ibid., 305.

In 1933 Millay and Eugen bought Ragged Island off the coast of Maine, “Ragged Island consisted of about fifty wild acres, surrounded by high rock ledges and with only one tiny harbor.”[39] They would spend parts of the summer here, sometimes inviting friends. On both the island and Steepletop, Millay and Eugen lived removed from society, generally only seeing friends by invitation.

A serious event occurred in 1936 when Millay was riding in a car and the door accidentally swung open around a bend, resulting in her being thrown out. Her arm was seriously injured and she was therefore prescribed morphine for the pain. Millay eventually began taking it around the clock and became addicted. There are detailed diaries that document every injection she had, but she was eventually able to quit the morphine after a hospital stay.[40] Millay had also been drinking alcohol very heavily, however, this was something she was never able to quit.[41]

Throughout the 1930’s Millay would go on reading tours of the United States in order to promote her books as well as when money was running short. The tours were extremely successful, and these events were selling out with overflow and standing room crowds.[42] An example of her popularity can be seen, within the midst of the Great Depression no less, when just eight weeks after the publication of *Wine From These Grapes* in 1934, it had sold an astounding 35,000 copies within a US population at the time of 130,879,718 (the equivalent of more than 900,000 copies today).[43] This popularity culminated by the summer of 1938, when Millay was voted as one of America’s most famous women.[44]

By the 1940s, Millay’s life was plagued with ill health and struggles with alcoholism. In addition to these struggles, Eugen passed away in 1949 of cancer. Millay was deeply affected by Eugen’s death. However, a year later she was writing once again. On the evening of October 19, 1950 she left a note for her housekeeper about the temperature of the iron, and proceeded to walk

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[39] Miriam Gurko, Steepletop and Ragged Island, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 171.

[40] Nancy Milford, Addiction, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 450.

[41] Max Eastman, “My Friendship with Edna Millay”, *Great Companions*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 103.

[42] Nancy Milford, The Great Tours, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 383.

[43] “US Population.” US population: From 1900. Accessed November 15, 2024. https://demographia.com/db-uspop1900.htm.

Nancy Milford, The Great Tours, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 384.

[44] Nancy Milford, The Great Tours, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 418.

upstairs with her wine glass and bottle. On her way up she suffered a heart attack and fell down the stairs. She was found dead on the flagstone entranceway, the next morning.[45] When Millay died she was wearing "her silk dressing gown and slippers."[46] Her sister Norma moved into the house and slept in Millay's bedroom but did not move anything from when Millay had lived there. Millay's clothes remained in the closet, the nicknacks were left on the mantle, etc.[47]

Millay and Sex

A few biographies define Millay's life primarily through her romantic relationships. This aspect of Millay's life is a very important part of her biography and deserves to be addressed. Aspects of this thesis examine Millay's relationship with the masculine and feminine, so it is therefore important to look at her relationships with both men and women in order to give a more full context for this discussion.

Millay's sexuality was a very important part of her life, as biographer Daniel Mark Epstein writes: "She…found two sources of strength that would sustain her for years to come: poetry and erotic love."[48] Millay was known for writing love sonnets that many biographers connect back to her personal life. As such, the following section discusses a few of Millay's most relevant relationships. There are two relationships I have chosen to examine below. These include her first potentially sexual relationship, which was with a woman (and her relationship to homosexuality), and her relationship with her husband Eugen, which was perhaps the most important as it crossed typical gendered roles of the time. The crossing of typical gendered lines in her personal life is reflected in both her clothing and the nature of her marriage.The crossing of these typical gendered lines has also influenced the choice of garments/ensembles that I chose to recreated for the research-creation aspect of this thesis in order to more fully and accurately explore Millay's life circumstances, desires and choices.

Epstein describes Millay's first sexual relationship in his biography *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed.* In 1912, when Millay was summoned to visit her ill father in Kingman, Maine, she began an affair with 24 year old Ella Somerville, a painter and daughter of Millay's father's, doctor. Somerville wrote graphic love letters praising Millay's genitalia, which Epstein's texts draw from, however these are currently inaccessible to the public.[49]

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[45] Nancy Milford, The Dying Fall, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 508.

[46] Ibid.

[47] I was told this when I was taken on a tour of Millay's house Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York on August 11th, 2022 by Mark O'Berski the Vice President/Treasurer of The Millay Society.

[48] Daniel Mark Epstein, Little Girl Grown Up, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001), 59.

[49] Ibid., 55-56.

Before and during Millay's time at Vassar, she only had sexual relations with women. Millay wrote about the rules at Vassar, in a 1914 letter to Arthur Ficke, "They trust us with everything but men….a man is forbidden as if he were an apple."[50] She did not have the means, while living at home in Camden, or at Vassar, where physical contact with men was essentially forbidden, to seek out heterosexual sexual relationships. Miriam Gurko writes that in Camden, Millay was not interested in boys. She explains that boys would come to their house but always to see Norma or Kathleen, not Millay.[51] However, we know from letters quoted in Milford's biography that Millay did carry on emotional affairs with men prior to and during her time at Vassar.[52] Once she was free of the rules enforced by Vassar and living in Greenwich Village, she slept with men and women as she pleased.

I argue that Millay was, in her own words, neither heterosexual nor homosexual, but both.[53] Millay's friend Max Eastman wrote about how once at a party, Millay had a headache and was approached by a young doctor who said he might be able to help. They went to a private room and he began to try and psychoanalyze her, something she notoriously disliked. He eventually got to his point, her sexuality. Her response was, as Eastman writes "Oh you mean, I'm homosexual! Of course I am, and heterosexual too, but what's that got to do with my headache?"[54] Eastman must have heard about this after the fact from Millay, or the young doctor, as he was not in the room when she said this.

It is important to note that the social constructions of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were relatively new at this time. As outlined in the book *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study* by Paula S. Rothenberg, these terms, as we understand them today, were not in use in the American lexicon until 1892, the year of Millay's birth. Dr. James G. Kiernan of Chicago published an article using these terms on March 7, 1892. This article, according to Rothenberg is the first published use of the words "heterosexual" and "homosexual" in the United States. "Kiernan defined 'Pure homosexual's' as a person who's 'general mental state is that of the opposite sex.' Kiernan thus defined homosexuals by the deviance from a gender

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[50] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed. "College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917", *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 48.

[51] Miriam Gurko, "Renasence", *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 34.

[52] Ferdinand Earle and Arthur Hooley.

Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 71.

[53] I am hesitant to use the word bisexual here, as Millay herself did not use this term, as far as I am aware, even though it was in use during this time, so I therefore do not feel comfortable assigning this title to her.

[54] Max Eastman, "My Friendship with Edna Millay", *Great Companions*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 91.

norm."[55] By 1901, "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were still not included in the *Comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary* (COED).[56] Although I was unable to confirm when they were first included in the *COED*, "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" began to be included in various dictionaries in the 1920s and 1930s.[57]

Historian Lillian Faderman writes about lesbian life in twentieth century America in her 1992 book*, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers.* She discusses Millay in her section on Bohemians in Greenwich Village. Faderman asserts that for Millay "to have chosen to live as a lesbian, even in the world of Greenwich Village, was too problematic for her, despite her history of love for other women."[58] Faderman also paints Millay's marriage to Eugen, as Millay having "succumbed to the pressure"[59] to marry a man. However, I feel Faderman is binary in her conclusions, not allowing for the full complexity of Millay's sexuality. Throughout the majority of her private life, Millay did exactly as she pleased and damn the consequences. It is also possible that over her life Millay's preference for men and women changed. When she was younger, perhaps she preferred women and later in life that desire shifted more to men. From my own experience as a queer woman, I know this can happen. Faderman takes quotes out of context, for instance, where Millay is quoted as saying that she and Eugen lived like two bachelors. This was said in 1931, eight years into their marriage. Is it not possible that their relationship changed over time?[60] Most Millay biographies tell of the time when Millay and Eugen, before they were a couple, played lovers in a play set at a party with friends, including Floyd Dell, the first man Millay ever had sex with, at least according to Dell.[61] Dell wrote they "Took their roles literally, all be it unconsciously, and fell in love, to their own vast surprise, right before everyone's eyes!"[62] However Floyd Dell admitted, she was never "cured" of a sexual interest in women, as if sexual interest in the same sex is something one needs to be cured of.

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[55] Paula S. Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States. An Integrated Study*, (New York: Saint Martin's Press Inc., 1998), 58.

[56] Ibid., 59.

[57] Merriam Websters, *New International Dictionary* and The *Oxford English Dictionary'*s first supplement.

Johnathan Ned. Katz "Who's Gay? What's Straight? - The Invention of Heterosexuality | Assault on Gay America | Frontline." PBS, 1995. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/context/katzhistory.html.

[58] Lillian Faderman, Lesbian Chic: The '20s, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers : A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Columbia University Press,1992), 87.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Nancy Milford, The Girl Poet, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 336.

[61] Jeri Dell, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Glenmere Press, 2017), 57.

[62] Jean Gould, The Poet Takes a Husband, *The Poet and Her Book: A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (Cornwall: Cornwall Press Inc. 1969), 157.

It also appears Millay and Eugen had an open marriage. Nancy Milford speculates that when Millay travelled to Paris to be alone with George Dillon in 1932 and Eugen was sailing home to the United States, that Eugen may have slept with a woman he met on the boat. Millay was at this time romantically involved with Dillon. Milford surmises, based on accounts in letters, that "[Millay's] affair with [George] Dillon altered her sexual relationship with her husband."[63] On the other hand Floyd Dell writes that "…I heard from a girl about his [Eugen] telling her that he was impotent – which, apparently, he was more or less, except on rare occasions."[64] Nevertheless there was a very deep attachment between Millay and Eugen. Millay relied very heavily on Eugen's presence, both emotionally and physically.[65]

Millay and Trousers

With this brief overview illustrating Millay's complicated sexuality, I will further examine her relationship with presenting as masculine, i.e. wearing trousers. As I read biographical texts of Millay I made note of any mention of clothing and found the mentions of her wearing trousers particularly interesting because they broke the rules of fashionable clothing for a women at the time. Though the mention of trousers are few, they are important to Millay's self-expression and the separation she makes between her private and public life. As well, since I have decided to recreate one of Millay's more masculine ensembles, though not trousers, this discussion is intended to provide a broader context for understanding the particularities of Millay's clothing preferences.

Throughout my research, I have uncovered five mentions of Millay wearing trousers. The first was on stage when she took the role of Marchbanks in Vassar's production of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida,* March 5th, 1915.[66] She dressed as the boy poet in love with the heroine and wore bobbed hair, a black tie and artists bow. Daniel Mark Epstein quotes a letter to her family:

> 'I felt *perfectly* at home in the clothes. People told me I reminded them of their brothers the way I walked around and slung my legs over the arms of chairs etc.… Somebody thought I really was a boy. Somebody thought it was wonderful the way I used my trousers and walked and stuck my hands in the pockets and crossed my legs – *as if I myself didn't notice I was doing it –*'[67]

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[63] Nancy Milford, The Girl Poet, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 349.

[64] Jeri Dell, Part III, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Glenmere Press, 2017), 96.

[65] Nancy Milford, Addiction, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 454.

[66] Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, *Vincent at Vassar*, (Poughkeepsie: Vassar Alumnae Magazine, 1951), 2.

[67] Daniel Mark Epstein, The Whirlpool of Eros, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001), 92.

This quote is interesting since Millay was playing, impersonating, and acting as a boy. She was aware of her choice of movements, even perhaps having studied men in order to learn how they moved differently from women, or perhaps this was simply Millay's innate acting ability on display. Her assertion that she felt "perfectly at home" in the clothes tells us that she felt, at least in her twenties, in some part comfortable wearing mens clothing. I personally had the opposite experience when I first wore the 1925 suit ensemble I made where I realized as soon as I changed out of the clothing back into my jeans and long-sleeve t-shirt that I had been uncomfortable, not physically, but mentally the whole time I wore the recreation. I believe this shows that Millay had a certain fluidity about her. I would suggest here that she had a range of clothing and associated personas that she felt at home with, which ranged from long dresses to trousers. She was to incorporate trousers into her private life over the next 35 years. However, in her public life, as seen in photographs and through written descriptions, she would present as fashionable and feminine.

The second mention of trousers is described by Floyd Dell in his memoir of his relationship with Millay in 1918 Greenwich Village, published in 2017 by his granddaughter, Jeri Dell. Millay is said to have been dressing, after a sexual encounter with Dell, in a blue Zouave corduroy suit.[68] In her footnotes Jeri Dell explains, "*Zouave* is a style that included women's trousers with wide tops tapering to a narrow ankle, was popular in the 1920s."[69] If this suit did indeed include trousers, they would likely have been wide legged perhaps even puffed at the bottom (see Zouave soldier's uniforms in Fig. 3).

The third mention took place on Ragged Island and was described by Vincent Sheean, the American journalist and novelist, in *The Indigo Bunting,* his memoir of Millay. Sheean describes Millay wearing jeans and a sport shirt.[70] He later describes the same jeans as overalls.[71] Biographer Nancy Milford also notes Millay wearing overalls on Ragged Island. According to Smith College theatre professor Kiki Smith in *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection*, women's overalls began during the First World War. "In 1916, a patent was issued for women's overalls, with a bib front, straps, and legs gathered by elastic at the ankle."[72] By 1917 they were being sold in the Sears and Roebucks catalogue. Smith writes that their popularity faded after World War I but had a resurgence of popularity in the 1930s. This instance of Millay wearing overalls is likely to be in

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[68] Jeri Dell, Part III, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Glenmere Press, 2017), 71

[69] Ibid., 239.

[70] Vincent Sheean, "The Indigo Bunting", *The Indigo Bunting: A Memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Schocken, 1973), 54.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Kiki Smith, Chapter 7 Pushing the Boundaries, *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection,* (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2023), 228.

the 1930s, based on when Vincent Sheean visited the island. Perhaps she preferred practicality in this rural setting.

The fourth mention is found in an unpublished Steepletop Garment Database, that details clothing left behind in her Austerlitz, New York home. The database was sent to me by the Millay Society. It lists seven pairs of silk sleeping/lounging trousers out of 154 items which incudes many purses, hats and shoes. Since there are so many pairs I think it is safe to assume she often wore trousers to bed or around the house, certainly in her later years. By the end of her life these are the only trousers in the collection, although I was also informed that the Database is not complete. These last three instances were strictly from her private life.

The fifth and final mention is found in the exhibition, *Influencers, 1920s Fashion and the New Woman*, at the Lyndhurst Mansion in Tarrytown, New York, which I visited September 14th, 2024. This exhibition and catalogue are the only instance that I have found of a reference to Millay's biography through her clothing. Two ensembles of Millay's clothing were exhibited: A Chinese silk pantsuit meant for house wear, also documented in the Steepletop Garment Database; and riding britches and jacket with white collared shirt and man's tie. A photograph of Millay wearing riding britches was included in the catalogue. This is among only three photographs I have been able to find of Millay wearing trousers, all of which are very casual photos.

According to the catalogue and exhibition descriptions, the editor, Howard A. Zar, and essay authors, Denise N. Green and Krystyna Poray Goddu, represent Millay and her clothing as ahead of its time and that she "influenced" women and was wearing trousers before it became socially acceptable. I question this representation, as well as some of the historical information provided within this catalogue. For instance, I do not fully agree with some claims being made, such as: that women of the Victorian period aimed for an 18-inch waist with a corset; and that "dressing by oneself was virtually impossible"; or that they needed to plan ahead in order to use the washroom.[73] In terms of the 18 inch waist measurement, fashion theorist Valerie Steele disputes this in her book *The Corset, A Cultural History*. Steele suggests, that the main source from this time, where women claim to lace their waists down to the teens, came from fetish fantasies rather than proven facts. She cites the sizes of corsets that were commonly sold, the smallest measuring 18 inches and going up to 43 inches.[74] She also contends that the "ideal" of the 1880s-1890s had more to do with the right ratio between bust, hips and waist, and that this was often achieved with padding rather than extreme tight-lacing. The other two claims can be disputed from my personal experience wearing historical reproduction clothing from the 1880s and 1890s (Fig. 4). I was easily able to put on and take off these clothes including the shirtwaist which buttons up

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[73] Howard A. Bar ed., *Influencers, 1920s Fashion and the New Woman,* (Tarrytown: Lyndhust, 2024), 30.

[74] This measurement does not include the lacing gap, a gap of one to three inches at the back of the corset when it is laced up. Corsets did not lace completely closed.

Valerie Steele, Fashion and Fetishism The Votaries of Tight-Lacing, *The Corset, A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 102.

the back. As for the washroom question, at this time in the 1800s and into the 1920s the crotch seam of women's underwear was not sewn shut. Split crotch drawers, as they were referred to, allowed for easy access to use the washroom (Fig. 5). I have personally experienced this while wearing these clothes.

I believe there may be two reasons these inaccurate claims mentioned above are printed in this catalogue. Firstly, is for their sensational value when presenting to a modern uneducated audience about the clothing of the past. This, in turn, leads to a strengthening of their main argument between the supposed imprisonment of the Victorian period versus the freedoms of the 1920s, which formed a large part of the thesis of this exhibit.

As is often the case in the study of history however, the real situation is far more nuanced, as can be seen in Kiki Smith's book, *Real Clothes, Real Lives.* Smith proposes a more historically accurate version where "in the 1920s, women cut their hair, gave up corsets emphasizing curves, and dressed in the so-called garçon style, which was slender and boyish if not androgynous."[75] As well, she points out that the corset was not fully abandoned. While some women did abandoned them, not all women did, and this was still before the invention of pantyhose so you would still need something around your waist to hold up your stockings. In *The Corset, A Cultural History*, Valerie Steele proposes that the physical corset was replaced by what she calls the muscular corset which is diet and exercise. Instead of wearing a corset and padding to achieve the desired fashionable look, women changed their bodies.[76]

In the catalogue *Influencers, 1920s Fashion and the New Woman* the authors extrapolate, using Millay's clothing, that she was a pioneer and a radical woman by wearing trousers. However, the authors are only using cherrypicked examples that support their claims. As discussed above, she did wear trousers, however, mostly at home. There is, as far as I have been able to find, only three accessible photographs of Millay in public in trousers, all likely taken in the late 1930's or 1940's, and one image was selected for this catalogue in order to prove their thesis of Millay as "a pioneer and radical woman". Given the scope of her career and extent of her wardrobe, I believe it is more likely that her true fashion influence, if any, would have been during the public readings of her poems which she did across the United States, starting as early as 1913.[77] In relation to clothing at one of these early readings she writes home, dated September 22nd, 1917, to her family about her host for the reading:

> My trunk hadn't come in so she dressed me up in something of hers, a gown with a train and hanging about six inches on the floor all around, made out of three rainbow coloured

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[75] Kiki Smith, Chapter 7 Pushing the Boundaries, *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection,* (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2023) 227.

[76] Valerie Steele, *The Corset, A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 143.

[77] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., II College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 39.

> scarves. And, family, I discover that I have nothing to give readings in, I *must* have long dresses, trailing ones. The short ones won't do.[78]

During her reading tours of the country in the 1930s, newspapers often commented on her fashionable apparel. She is described by one reporter as wearing "a stunning gown of red velvet, trimmed in gild braid and a black velvet cape."[79]

While Millay described her reading gowns as "costumes," so perhaps not what she would have chosen to wear except while on display, she often wore what was described as a suit for interviews or work (but not for readings).[80] There are three suits from the 1940s found in the Steepletop Garment Database. An important note is that all of these suits contain skirts, not trousers. Kiki Smith notes slack suits emerged in the 1930s though were more popular by the 1940s.[81] For instance, author Frederic Prokosch described a meeting with Millay in 1934 where she was wearing "a grey flannel suit, with a blue-striped shirt and a green silk cravat."[82] It is unlikely that she wore trousers as this would most likely have been remarked upon.

1925 Publicity Suit

There is also a photograph of Millay in a suit and tie taken in 1925 that was used to help publicize her first volume of poetry since winning the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1925 Berenice Abbott took this publicity photo for Millay's book *The Buck in the Snow* (1928). In one photo (Fig. 2), Millay appears to be wearing a soft collar shirt with a silk tie and black jacket. Beneath the tie on the collar is a pin drawing both collar points together, giving a similar impression to a masculine Oxford shirt. The shirt has cuffs which poke out of the jacket sleeves. The jacket is fairly unstructured with what could be an understated camp collar. There are three large buttons arranged vertically below her elbow. These appear to be part of the jacket that hangs low over her hips, with no waistline. This was a popular 1920's woman's style. She also appears to have a knee length skirt with her stockinged knee showing in the left hand corner of the photograph. Upon closer inspection she is in fact wearing a fashionable 1920s women's suit (Fig.10) but perhaps with a masculine flavour, especially with this particular shirt and tie.

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[78] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., "III Post-College Years June 1917, to end of 1920", *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 76.

[79] Nancy Milford, "The Great Tours", *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 422.

[80] Ibid., 432.

[81] Kiki Smith, Chapter 7 Pushing the Boundaries, *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection,* (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2023), 232,

[82] Nancy Milford, "The Great Tours", *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 388.

Nancy Milford described Millay in this photograph as "dressed like a young man."[83] She also stated she could find no contemporary commentary on this unusual presentation. It is not remarked upon in any other biography of Millay. Lillian Faderman gives an example of a woman dressing masculine on top. Dr. Sarah Josefine Baker in the early twentieth century wore shirtwaists with stiff collars, men's tailored suits and four-in-hand ties to work, "I badly needed protective clothing… [so that] when a masculine colleague of mine looked around the office in a rather critical state of mind, no feminine furbelows would catch his eye and give him an excuse to become irritated by the presence of a woman where according to him a woman had no right to be… I wore a costume – almost a uniform – because the last thing I wanted was to be conspicuously feminine when working with men."[84] Faderman also discusses women passing as men in the early twentieth century and how "unlike in the latter half of the 20th century, women never wore pants. A person in pants would have been assumed to be male, and only the most suspicious would have scrutinized facial features and body movements to discern a woman beneath the external appearance."[85] She writes that these women mostly crossdressed so they could work and make a man's wage rather than to have relationships with women, as usually the wages paid to women were not enough to make ends meet. Kiki Smith writes about a 1920s suit in the Smith College Clothing Collection, where the suit was likely a man's suit made for a woman to pass as a man. She also writes, women "who dressed in men's clothes could be accused of exhibiting deviant behavior, arrested, and even confined to a mental institution."[86] For example, in Paris it was illegal for a woman to wear trousers unless the police gave her permission. This law was in effect until 2013.[87] In New York City there is an instance where a woman was arrested in 1933 for wearing trousers.[88] Rusty Brown a New York lesbian remembers a law where "you had to have three pieces of female attire" when in public.[89]

Perhaps because Millay was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1923 these clothing choices were a way of demonstrating she belonged with the previous all male winners.[90] Kiki Smith writes that "Most men's suits of the 1920s consisted of three pieces: a jacket, pants,

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[83] Nancy Milford, The Girl Poet, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 335

[84] Lillian Faderman, Loves of Women for Each Other, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers : A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Columbia University Press,1992), 21.

[85] Ibid., A Worm in Bud, 42.

[86] Kiki Smith, Chapter 7 Pushing the Boundaries, *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection,* (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2023), 227.

[87] Eleanor Medhurst, *Unsuitable: A History of Lesbian Fashion*, (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2024) 65.

[88] Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, Introduction, *Skirts: Fashioning Modern Femininity in the Twentieth Century*, (Macmillan, 2022), 16.

[89] Eleanor Medhurst, *Unsuitable: A History of Lesbian Fashion*, (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2024) 104.

[90] Daniel Mark Epstein, Preface, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001), xiv.

and a vest."[91] Millay's clothing is therefore not fully "masculine" as she is missing the vest and trousers, and her suit can definitely be classed as women's clothing.

The traditional role of the man is prevalent in Millay's story. Millay's reference to herself using male pronouns in letters and her transformation into a little boy in her Pulitzer Prize winning poem, *Ballad of the Harp Weaver,* reinforces the culturally gendered role she fulfilled in the family.[92] She was the main breadwinner in adulthood and head of household while her mother was away during her childhood. As the oldest of her sisters in childhood, she needed to be the responsible one. Daniel Mark Epstein writes that Millay was a "girl whose childhood was taken from her too soon."[93] Once in Greenwich Village, she was the one financially supporting most of the family, something which continued for the rest of her life. In other words she was filling the role that a father or husband was expected to take. This cultural male role rarely appears physically in Millay photographs except for the 1925 Abbott publicity photos. Miriam Gurko, writes "Whether or not the boyish name had anything to do with it, Vincent, growing up, did have more of the freedom ordinarily granted to boys rather than to girls."[94] It is not clear what freedoms she is exactly referring to but perhaps it had to do with the lack of parental control while Cora was away working. Gurko later writes, "At home in Maine she had been free to yield to virtually any impulse… [at Vassar] smoking was completely banned – a restriction she evaded by taking her cigarettes off-campus to a nearby cemetery."[95] Later after graduation she continued to yield to any impulse she desired.

While at Vassar she went by "Vincent" although she was glad to embrace her feminine side. Nancy Milford cites a letter she wrote home while at Vassar describing the school dances where half the girls would dress up as men. Millay was glad to be short as it meant she could dress as a girl.[96]

E. Vincent Millay, the name she published under in childhood, was known by the St Nicholas League as Master Millay (a male designation) from age eleven to eighteen when she finally corrected them. In the past, many female authors did not present as female for professional reasons and this common practice included, authors such as George Elliott and more recently

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[91] Kiki Smith, Chapter 7 Pushing the Boundaries, *Real Clothes, Real Lives: 200 Years of What Women Wore; The Smith College Historic Clothing Collection,* (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2023), 227.

[92] Nancy Milford, "Paris is Where the 20th Century Was", *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 212-217.

[93] Daniel Mark Epstein, Little Girl Grown Up, *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loses and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2001), 35.

[94] Miriam Gurko, 1. Mr. and Mrs. Millay, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 2.

[95] Idid., 9. Vassar, 54.

[96] Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 332. 270-271.

J.K. Rowling. The same assumption happened when *Renascence* was published. Letters addressed to Millay assumed she was a man. In response to Witter Bynner and Arthur Ficke's assumption that *Renascence* must have been written by a brawny man of forty-five, not a woman of twenty, Millay responded, "I cling to my femininity."[97] The word choice here is very interesting. Why "cling"? Perhaps with "Vincent" beginning to fill the role of the man, supporting her family financially she felt a need to "cling" as though her femininity was something that could easily slip away. [98]

Growing up in a predominantly female household, Daniel Mark Epstein writes that she "had grown up in a household of singularly independent women and no men."[99] Millay and her sisters would sometimes use male pronouns in letters to each other or referring to each other as "young man."[100] At the time, going by the name Vincent, daily, when using a man's name was uncommon, is another example of masculine language from her childhood.[101] Perhaps these were a way of imagining there was a man in the house, at a time when the men were expected to provide and they did not have this support. This lack of a traditional male household role model is something that would continue on and off for the rest of Millay's life.

Millay's Pulitzer Prize winning poem, *Ballad of the Harp Weaver* is ostensibly about her mother and herself, though in the poem the child character is a little boy. This is another example of Millay gender swapping in her writing. Nancy Milford draws the connection between the mother in *Ballad of the Harp Weaver* and Cora, describing Cora's hair loom, where she used to weave hair pieces for money, a skill she learned from her mother but refused to pass onto her daughters. This is reminiscent of the poem, where the mother wants better for her children than she had for herself.[102]

While the 1925 suit ensemble might be thought of as Millay expressing her homosexual interests by presenting as, both feminine and masculine, her choice of wearing a masculine top and a skirt below the waist is still a relatively conventional choice. Let's consider for a moment what the

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[97] Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 80.

[98] Of course this has not begun yet, but the potential of winning a cash prize from The Lyric Year would have been the beginning of this role.

[99] Miriam Gurko, Figs and Thistles, *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962)129.

[100] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., I Childhood and Youth in Maine 1900-1912, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 8.

[101] Ibid., II College Years, Barnard and Vassar 1913-1917, 34.

[102] Nancy Milford, Part Four: "Paris is Where the 20th Century Was", *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 218.

effect might be if a powerful woman in 1925 had publicized images of the reverse — [103]a feminine top with trousers below the waist. I think that would be much more unsettling or revolutionary. In her master's thesis, Karen De Lutis discusses the dress reform movement in the mid to late 1800s. She describes this as a heterosexual reform movement, that promoted types of trousers (and other changes in dress) for women. While the movement never caught on to mainstream fashion, De Lutis details examples of trousers on women being banned in various locations until the mid-1980s.[104] This underscores the controversial aspects of a woman in a bifurcated garment. I would surmise that based on the lack of contemporary and later biographical comment on these photographs, that what matters most here is what's worn below the waist. The man's shirt and tie holds less, although still some disruptive power, than a pair of trousers on a woman would have. Fashion designer, Miuccia Prada in a 2006 interview with the New York Times stated, "The skirt is a feminine symbol… to me, the waist up is more spiritual, more intellectual, while the waist down is more basic, more grounded. It's about sex. It's about making love. It's about life. It's about giving birth. Basically below the waist is more connected to the earth."[105] Millay is dressed as a woman with a touch of masculine, rather than dressed as masculine with a touch of feminine. In many ways this ensemble describes her character in these years as the woman breadwinner of her family, who can be both feminine and masculine at the same time.

Here are the videos of my making the 1925 skirt, the 1925 shirt and the 1925 jacket.

Sociologist, Diana Crane, describes how a woman wearing a tie in the nineteenth century was a feminist act, an "expression of independence" and an assault on masculine privilege.[106] Millay wore a tie on multiple occasions.[107] The tie in this 1925 photograph has, I believe, a significance to her being the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Crane explains, "Fashionable clothing exemplified the doctrine of separate spheres that was supported by other social

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[103] Something that was not a costume for a show for example as women did still play men, certainly in English Christmas Pantomimes.

Hodgson, Nichi. "Why Today's Panto Prefers to See Boys Playing Girls Who Play Boys | Nichi Hodgson." The Guardian, December 23, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/23/pantomime-gender-cross-dressing.

[104] Karen De Lutis, "Women and Trousers. Being a Work of Dual Garnitures and a Case Study of the Bifurcated Movement in Nineteenth-Century Clothing for Women in North America." Master's thesis, Concordia University, 2000, 1-3.

[105] Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, "Introduction", *Skirts: Fashioning Modern Femininity in the Twentieth Century*, (Macmillan, 2022), 10.

[106] Diana Crane, "Diana Crane: Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance." CS - Resources, September 25, 2013. https://csuca.wordpress.com/mapping-the-modern/diana-crane-clothing-behavior-as-non-verbal-resistance/.

[107] As discussed in this thesis, the 1925 image, meeting with Frederic Prokosch and there is a tie in one of the ensembles of her clothing in the *Influencers* exhibition.

institutions."[108] Millay was crossing the separation of male and female spheres when she won the Pulitzer. Design historian Penny Sparke writing about the separation of the public and private spheres in her book *As Long as It's Pink, The Sexual Politics of Taste,* explains how historically, women acted within the private realm and men in the public. Sparke contends: "The 'separation of the spheres' relegated women to the world of domesticity."[109] Millay's place as the breadwinner of her family and Eugen's position in charge of the household is a reversal of this social norm.

In 1931 Milly is quoted as having said "I have nothing to do with my household"[110] implying that was Eugen's job. As he mentioned more than once, he took care of her like his "child."[111] He gave up much of his work to look after her and allow her to write. This swap of traditional gender roles is perhaps a culmination of what Millay's life always seemed to be heading towards. From her unconventional childhood, to supporting her mother and sisters in the 1920's, to her final marriage and fame, she filled the traditional man's role and this was reflected more in her personal, private clothing, riding britches, overalls and sport shirt on Ragged Island, with the exception of the 1925 Berenice Abbott publicity photograph.

1914 Tan Linen Dress

With Abbott's photograph being an exception to most other photographs taken of Millay, it is also important to examine one of the most famous feminine ensembles worn by Millay. Perhaps the most widely circulated photograph of Millay is a photograph of her amongst magnolia blossoms wearing a very fashionable tan linen dress.

In 1914 Arnold Genthe (1869-1942) took this photograph (Fig. 1) at her publishers house in Mamaroneck, New York.[112] Genthe took many portraits of celebrities over the course of his career. The photo shows Millay in a linen dress with a sailors collar (middy collar), peplum and square buttons down the front. Nancy Milford describes this photo as a "single shot of her

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[108] Diana Crane, "Diana Crane: Clothing Behavior as Non-Verbal Resistance." CS - Resources, September 25, 2013. https://csuca.wordpress.com/mapping-the-modern/diana-crane-clothing-behavior-as-non-verbal-resistance/.

[109] Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink, The Sexual Politics of Taste,* (Halifax: The Press of the NSCAD, 1995), xxi.

[110] Nancy Milford, The Girl Poet, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 336.

[111] She was often referred to as a child by Eugen or as a girl by journalists. Millay was well into adulthood at this time.

Nancy Milford, The Great Tours, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 384

[112] Genthe, Arnold. "Edna St. Vincent Millay at Mitchell Kennerley's House in Mamaroneck, New York." Library of Congress, January 1, 1970. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018704460/.

standing among the magnolia blossoms [that] would become the blaze that marked an era in American poetry as her own."[113]

Millay writes about this dress in a letter home: "Wanamaker's department store sent four women to McGlynn's parlour to model its spring style, '& I have paid $10.50 for a tan linen, tailory, cutey, *so* becoming, with a white muslin collar, spring dress, that I really need to wear to college.'"[114]

The collar of the dress is worth noting and I believe gives us clues as to its type and social acceptability. There is a second photo of Millay, at Vassar, in a coat where she is sitting outside (Fig. 6). This coat has the same type of sailor's collar as the tan linen dress. Millay began at Vassar in 1913. This type of collar was fashionable and appropriate for college, perhaps it is even the thing that attracted Millay to the dress and the coat. Nancy Milford quotes a classmate of Millay's talking about how Vassar wasn't a college for rich girls, "we all wore middies, which were a sort of levelling uniform…"[115] Middies are a type of sailor top. The name deriving from the uniform of the midshipmen in the US Navy,[116] this collar became very popular with school girls, both college and high school.[117] A variation on the middy blouse was the Peter Thompson dress (Fig. 7), "Peter Thompson was a tailor in the navy who had taken the middy blouse and added a pleated skirt to it; many private schools for girls eventually adopted it as a uniform."[118] Originally from masculine sailors clothing, a middy collar is the type of collar on both the tan linen dress and the coat in the photographs.[119] Millay's class mate continued, "…Although it is true that one knew, if one were observant, that certain middies were from Wanamaker's. Or they might be from Filene's."[120]

Wannamaker's Department Store was originally opened in Philadelphia. The store had an organ in it and had several annual sales to increase turnover.[121] Filene's "instituted a minimum-wage

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[113] Nancy Milford, The Escape Artist, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 117.

[114] Ibid., 115.

[115] Nancy Milford, The Escape Artist, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 134.

[116] Linda Przybyszewski, 2 Art: Principals for Beauty, *The Lost Art of the Dress, The Women Who Once Made America Stylish*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014) 68.

[117] Ibid., 4 Thrift: Much for Little, 157.

[118] Ibid., 157.

[119] Folkwear Sewing Patterns, "211 Two Middies - PDF." Folkwear. https://www.folkwear.com/products/211-two-middies-pdf.

[120] Nancy Milford, The Escape Artist, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 134.

[121] "John Wanamaker." PBS. Accessed June 7, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/theymadeamerica/whomade/wanamaker_lo.html.

scale for female employees."[122] Filene's based out of Boston, expanded to New York City with a store which ran from 1908-2005 called Filene's Basement that took overflow items and heavily discounted them. Filene's is lauded as a bargain basement pioneer.[123] From this I surmise Wanamaker's was higher end that Filene's.

Millay would have been considered from a lower class. Miriam Gurko states, "It probably never occurred to her to go to college – college was not in the pattern for poor young girls living in little Maine towns."[124] Millay's excitement over this dress and her description for her mother and sisters suggests this dress was important to her. Nancy Milford concludes, "She was a girl who wanted to be beautiful, and well liked and powerful in her class [at Vassar]."[125] With her clothing budget coming from Miss Dow, she was shopping at Wannamaker's, the more high end of the two department stores. The way she dressed in college was not in line with her social class or background. It was, however, distinguished and very much in style.

In terms of clothing there was a shift in the 1920's from making to buying. Peter G. Filene (unable to confirm if there is any relation to the department store) writes, "The thousands of women who daily crowded the new department stores in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities were participating in the trend away from production and towards consumption. By the 1920s, the economic function of housewives was centred largely on what they bought (with their husbands money) rather than on what they made."[126] In Millay's case she was not buying anything with her husband's money. She would have bought the tan linen dress with the money Caroline Dow raised for her, and later in life her clothing would have been bought from money she had earned from her writing. It is also clear from letters and diary entries that from childhood into the late 1910s Millay did make some of her own clothes,[127] however it appears that when she had the funds available especially, later in life, she chose to buy her clothes.[128] A reporter for the World-Telegram wrote in 1931, "She buys the latest gowns and frocks and shoes and hats,

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[122] "Research Guides: Filene's Department Store History and Marketing Archives: Home." Home - Filene's Department Store History and Marketing Archives - Research Guides at Boston Public Library. Accessed November 2, 2024. https://guides.bpl.org/filenes.

[123] Staff, Community Advocate. "Filene's Was a Pioneer in Discount Department Store History." Fifty Plus Advocate, February 7, 2024. https://www.fiftyplusadvocate.com/2024/01/23/260686-filenes-was-a-pioneer-in-discount-department-store-history/

[124] Miriam Gurko, 9. "Renasence", *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962), 34.

[125] Nancy Milford, The Escape Artist, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 115.

[126] Peter G. Filene, I End of the Victorian Era (1890-1919), *Him/Her/Self, Sex Roles in Modern America,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 19.

[127] Nancy Milford, Greenwich Village: Bohemia, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 150.

[128] Edna St. Vincent Millay, The Fitting , *Collected Poems*, (New York: Harpers, 2011) 342.

then retires to her mountain fastness and puts them in closets."[129] This press example shows that Millay's "influencing" of the general public was perhaps more towards fashionable feminine dress, for the most part.

Even early in her life, Millay's choice of clothing often reflected fashionable trends. While her mother was away working as a private nurse Millay would sometimes have friends over. One friend, Ethel Night, recalled Millay opening the door to her house wearing "a blouse of white muslin with cuffs and boned collar made of rows of insertion edged with lace. A full gored skirt came to the top of her buttoned boots; a patent leather belt circumscribed a wide equator around her tiny middle; and a big blue bow spread its wings behind her head with her hair fastened in a 'bun.'"[130] This event likely took place around 1908 when this kind of romantic ensemble was very fashionable. This shows Millay's keen interest in being fashionable, even though her family did not have abundant resources. This would have been at the peak popularity of the Gibson Girl.

The artist and illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, is credited with creating the first national beauty standard for women in America, the Gibson Girl (Fig. 8).[131] These pen and ink illustrations were published widely including in *Life Magazine* where Gibson was the editor. In Gibson's illustrations, the Gibson Girl's clothing is often more suggestive than descriptive. She is usually seen in a full-length, full-gored skirt, sometimes blowing in the wind. She often wears a shirtwaist (sometimes layered with a jacket), or evening gowns. The Gibson Girl silhouette with the large pompadour hair, puffed sleeves and long skirt can be seen on women in photography of the time.[132] The short description of Millay's outfit described above is no doubt influenced by the Gibson Girl's standard of feminine beauty.

Later, in 1927, while protesting the Sacco and Vanzetti case, she was photographed wearing very fashionable women's clothing (Fig. 9). Millay seemed to recognize the power of dress, and like many of the women's rights advocates, chose to dress fashionably and conventionally so as not to take away from their political message.[133]

Construction Video: 1914 Tan Linen Dress

Reflections on the Recreated Clothing Ensembles

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[129] Nancy Milford, The Girl Poet, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 330.

[130] Ibid., This Double Life, 35.

[131] "The Gibson Girl's America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson Exhibition Home." Library of Congress, March 30, 2013. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/.

[132] Glamour Post. "Women Show the Latest Pompadour Hairstyles -1909." Glamour Daze, March 22, 2019. https://glamourdaze.com/2013/09/women-show-the-latest-pompadour-hairstyles-1909.html.

[133] Laura J. Ping "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses': Women and Dress Reform, 1820-1900." Doctoral Dissertation, The City University of New York, 2018, iv.

While wearing the recreated 1914 Tan Linen Dress I was struck by a few things. First, how this type of clothing was not made for lounging. The corset I wore underneath (a recreation from the 1910s) encouraged good posture. Even though the top was loose, the under layers were not. This is why wearing the correct foundational garments is important for clothing of this time. Second was the tightness of the belt and peplum. When sitting, I had to be conscious of not moving too forcefully or else the snaps that held the side closed would open. Perhaps this was a patterning or construction error, but I don't think so. I followed manuals of the time and my skirt fits very similarly to the skirt in the photograph of Millay. The experience of making and wearing this recreation helps not only to understand how the garment was made and worn, but also why she is so proper and feminine in the Arnold Genthe photographs. The dress (and undergarments) influence how you hold yourself.

The 1925 publicity suit, on the other hand, while more structured than the top, is worn with different undergarments and can therefore be worn with a more modern idea of comfort. I could slouch in the jacket, like Millay does in the photograph.

These reflections help in the understanding of her biography and how her clothing choices changed over the years. After she stopped wearing corsets, one assumes, in the 1920s she also began to collect trousers, which she would wear in private, while not on display. Her choice of public clothing also followed in a similar vain of being more comfortable in a modern sense of the term.

The feelings she experienced in not wearing a corset and starting to wear trousers is not something I am unable to relate to or speak to. Experiencing this historical change in clothing is not fully possible today. Another significant change that occurred in this time was when she bobbed her hair. Millay wrote about both these changes she made in later life in a diary entry in 1909, "I'm tired of being grown up! Tired of dresses that kick around my feet; tired of high heeled shoes; tired of conventions and proprieties; tired, tired and sick of hair pins!"[134]

Conclusion

When I make recreated pieces I am not always sure what they fully mean until well after they are complete and I have spent time with and in them. For instance it was only months after I wore the first corset I made that I realized how comfortable it was and the benefits it had in reducing back pain. It only became clear to me, slowly over time, that a well-fitted corset was not a torture device. The personal knowledge that is gained from the recreated pieces is retrospective knowledge and not enough time has passed for me to fully comprehend these recreated garments of Millay. My first impressions have to do with the context in which I was wearing them. For example, with the 1914 tan linen dress that I wore to take photos outdoors in Maine in December, it was clear that it was not the correct weather for an unlined linen dress. While

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[134] Nancy Milford, This Double Life, *Savage Beauty, The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), 49

wearing the clothing I am often too stuck in my head about the mistakes and fitting issues, particularly with the suit jacket, that I don't feel able to fully embody the wearing of the clothing. What the recreations do give us is a physical representation of Millay's clothing that is accessible, as the clothing left behind after her death is not available to be seen or worn.

Making the clothing does allow me to engage directly in the original practice and techniques of construction of the time. These recreated garments put me in a head space where I am thinking about how they fit into a historic puzzle that we have moved beyond. So reflection is always in terms of what I know today vs. what I am attempting to understand from a time period long since gone. The same would be true for how one wears these garments; our perceptions are always in comparison to what we know about making and wearing garments today. Memory can't be resorted to because I don't have access to the past except through extant clothing and sewing manuals, but perhaps this process of recreation helps to build a link that doesn't rely on memory. It is a reenactment of an experience from the past.

Millay contains multitudes, but if one only looks at her biography and not the clothing one could argue she is quite a radical bohemian. Considering both the writing and the clothing makes it clear that in her private life and her writing she did exactly what she wanted, however as a public persona she is significantly more restrained, appearing by and large through a much more conventional presentation. In her personal life, she slept with whoever she wanted, she drank as much as she wanted, she wore trousers around the house, she smoked in college when it was banned, swam naked and wrote scandalous poems. This separation between her public and private persona is made abundantly clear through her choice of clothing. Design historian Penny Sparke suggests that, "like people, objects have lives, and their meanings change in response to the different context within which they are found."[135] The trousers in the Steepletop Garment Database, are all house wear. And we only have three accessible photographs of her in trousers, one where she is wearing riding britches in the company of her husband. Her public presentation at readings was almost exclusively through long fashionable gowns with trains. One explanation for this is that she did not want to take away from the power of her work by having the discussion in the press be about her unconventional presentation. Her clothing in this sense does not represent her unconventional personal life and sexuality. This presence of mind is also represented in the childhood name she published under, E. Vincent Millay. A name that could be assumed to be male and therefore have more power and possibility for respect than if she had published as Edna, a young girl. Later, after the power of *Renascence* became clear, she published under her full name. Society and the power of women was also changing quickly in 1912 when *Renascence* was published, and especially later in the 1920s. I believe this is also a significant factor in the power her full name came to hold in American society. Through both the uses of her name and her clothing, Millay chose to both disguise and reveal certain aspects of her persona. These were aspects of her life she had complete control over and used them strategically.

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[135] Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink, The Sexual Politics of Taste,* (Halifax: The Press of the NSCAD, 1995), xxiv.

Millay makes clear her understanding of the metaphorical as well as the social power of clothing in her 1939 poem *The Plaid Dress.* She constructs a metaphor, of turmoil and the personal self, through a garment that can not be taken off. In a public event, the personal self is not necessarily seen, yet is still ever present. She describes the garment which faces the public, as subtle. Millay chose to use this subtlety in public clothing choices in order to navigate the various situations she either desired to put herself into, or alternately, to protect herself from falling into.

The Plaid Dress
Edna St. Vincent Millay[136]

Strong sun, that bleach
The curtains of my room, can you not render
Colourless this dress I wear?—
This violent plaid
Of purple angers and red shames; the yellow stripe
Of thin but valid treacheries; the flashy green of kind deeds done
Through indolence high judgments given here in haste;
The recurring checker of the serious breach of taste?

No more uncoloured than unmade,
I fear, can be this garment that I may not doff;
Confession does not strip it off,
To send me homeward eased and bare;

All through the formal, unoffending evening, under the clean
Bright hair,
Lining the subtle gown. . .it is not seen,
But it is there.

[136] Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Works*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 348.

Figures

Fig. 1 - Arnold Genthe, *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, 1914, photograph, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki File:Portrait_photograph_of_Edna_St._Vincent_Millay_LOC_agc.7a10216.tif

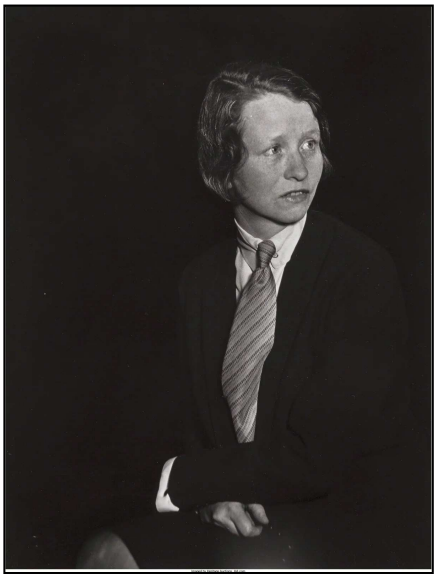

Fig. 2 - Berenice Abbott, *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, 1925, photograph, www.artsy.net/.

Fig. 3 - Unknown Author, *Zouave Uniform*, 1861-1877, photograph, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_687492.

Fig. 4 - Mark West, *Yesha West in 1890s*, 2022, photograph.

Fig. 5 - Yesha West, *Victorian women's split crotch drawers*, 2024, photograph.

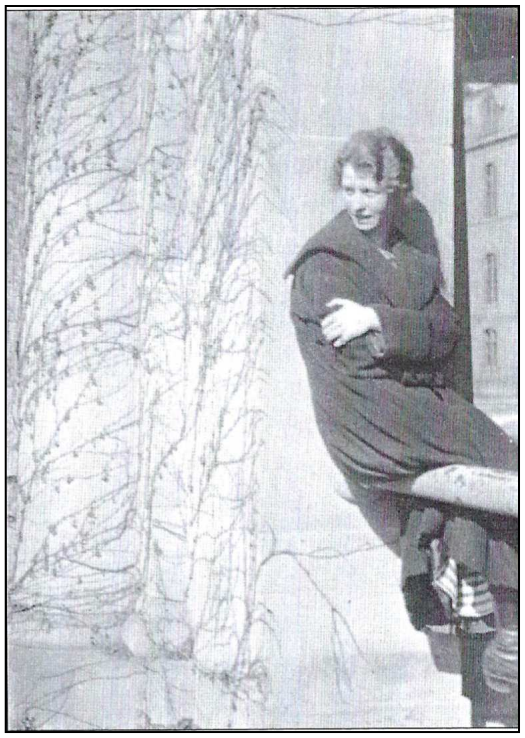

Fig. 6 - Jeri Dell, *Edna St. Vincent Millay, Vassar College,* 1917, *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay,* (New York: Glenmere Press, 2017), 120.

Fig. 7 - Unknown Author, *Peter Thompson Dress*, 1902, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/84005.

Fig. 8 -Charles Dana Gibson, *Love in a Garden* (detail), 1901, illustration, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Love_in_a_Garden,_Gibson.jpg.

Fig. 9 - Author Unknown, *Edna St. Vincent Millay protesting the Sacco and Vanzetti verdict*, 1927, Massachusetts, photograph, https://www.instagram.com/digpublib/p/Cq3LKyLrtMR/

Fig. 10 - Author Unknown, *1920s women suits*,1920s UK Harvey Nichols Magazine Advert. n.d. Alamy. Magazine page, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-1920s-uk-harvey-nichols-magazine-advert-85356110.html?

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