Millay’s “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver”: Re-Vision

Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” may appear to be a simple poem. The narrative ballad can be interpreted as a moving testimony to a mother’s unconditional love. Often recorded as a Christmas carol, Johnny Cash croons out versions of the ballad in holiday cheer. “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” was dismissed by literary critics for a so-called lack of intellect — despite the fact that the poem was the title piece of Millay’s Pulitzer Prize winning book of poetry. A re-vision of the poem unlocks a powerful feminist reading, which “would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been lead to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh” (Rich 18). The “Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” is Millay’s outcry against the traditional role of women in society. Millay’s poem voices her attempt to turn the tables on male tradition.

Millay employs a harp image throughout “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” in order to remind the reader of the woman’s choice and what she was forced to leave behind for motherhood. Millay does not write of the mother’s sacrifices because the son is blind to them. He thinks nothing of her gifts, because to him she has no choice but to provide for him. The woman did indeed have a choice. The son never questions why there is a harp in their home. The only details of the harp are that his mother told him, “Nobody will buy” (12) it, and it has “a woman’s head” (11). The harp is monetarily worthless, and its only attribute is its woman’s head. Using these details, Millay implies
that the boy believes the harp to be worthless because of its womanly qualities. But the last thing the woman reaches for is the harp when she dies with “her hands in the harp-strings” (121). So, the instrument is obviously significant to her. The woman yearns to play the harp, but motherhood has left her little time for hobbies. Motherhood transforms her harp into a loom. Weaving replaces music, and the mother “sang as she worked, And the harp-strings spoke” (110-111). Millay writes about the weaving with a swaying melody: “Were weav-weav-weaving / Wonderful things” (83). The mother uses music to transport herself to a happy place but can only do so when her son is asleep.

Millay’s deliberate use of the combination of harps and weaving is rooted in the instrument’s rich and historical ties to women. Weaving imagery, according to Jane Snyder’s “The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Home and the Lyric Poets,” dates back to ancient Greek times. Weaving is portrayed in a musical sense. Loom work is traditionally a woman’s work and their standard occupation. But references to Homer see the weaving metaphor as a description of an intellectual progress. Snyder writes of the “original conception of weaving as a primarily female form of creativity” (196). Weaving is often associated with singing due to the physical similarities of Greek looms and Greek lyres. Classic writers often refer to the image of weaving upon strings. “The process of making song was . . . a craft to be learned, through which the poet could create a tapestry of words woven together in a controlled design” (196). Similarly, harps and harpers often appear in literature, especially in children’s fantasy. According to Gwenth Evans in “Harp and Harpers in Contemporary Fiction,” harps symbolize three main elements: the power of music to affect society; heroic sacrifice; and the harper’s own musical skill as a way of singling him, or her, out from others. The harp often appears as “the prized
Millay explores the power of love in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver.” “The allegorical content of the poem is that the family, though poor in the things of the world, is rich in love; the miracle is that the mother finds a way to convert tenor to vehicle, to make the wealth of her love for the boy into tangible beauty and wealth” (Myers 70). But ultimately the mother’s love (and death) will not prove to be sufficient for the son. When the mother dies at the end of the poem, the son is left with an ample supply of clothing. But who will feed him when his mother is gone? Where will he live? How much is a mother’s love really worth? Is to die for love to die in vain? Millay leaves the reader wondering these questions of love. These same questions reappear in Sonnet XXX of *Fatal Interview*, a collection of Millay’s sonnets:

Love is not all: It is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain,
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
and rise and sink and rise and sink again.

Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
It well may be that in a difficult hour,
pinned down by need and moaning for release
or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It may well be. I do not think I would.

As in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver,” Millay questions the power of love. The beginning of the sonnet starts with the realization that “Love is not all” (1), in the sense that love is an object and purpose only exists in objects that lead to survival. Love is not presented as an emotion but rather as a potential form of sustenance. Love cannot save one from death, yet the lack of love turns men to seek death. Millay presents love as a heart-wrenching struggle, and because of this struggle, the narrator questions love’s worth: “I might be driven to sell your love for peace” (12). Perhaps the mother in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” sells her son’s love for the peace found in death. The closing lines of the sonnet present the internal struggle one faces when choosing between love and peace.

Millay never changes the setting in the poem. All action takes place in the home as if the mother is secluded from the rest of the world and is only responsive to her son. Inside the home, the mother holds all control. Outside holds the dangers of “A wind with a wolf’s head” (56). The little boy cannot go outside because he does not have clothing to keep him warm. He laments for what he is missing outside his home:

    I couldn’t go to school,
    Or out of doors to play.
And all the other little boys
Passed our way. (31-34)

He is imprisoned in his home until he has the proper attire. This will happen only when his mother weaves him warm clothes. The boy gets his freedom when his mother dies.

When approaching “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” through a feminist revision, one must wonder why a mother’s love must result in death. The mother in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” ultimately sacrifices her life to clothe her son. Clothing is a symbol of the mother’s love. It physically warms and protects her son in a way that her emotions cannot. The mother’s only worries throughout the poem are directed toward her son. Selflessly, she is not concerned by having “not a rag” (4) for herself. She distracts him with the sweet lullaby of “a mother-goose rhyme” (44) when she cannot give him what he needs. Millay uses the image of an overgrown boy sitting in his mother’s lap with his “long legs dragging on the floor” (41-42) to portray the mother desperately trying to coddle and protect her child from the hardships of the world outside their home. When the mother dies at the end of the poem she has “A smile about her lips,” (119) as if she died happy knowing she has provided for her son. The scene is peaceful, and there is “a light about her head” (120). This light is a stark contrast to the bleak darkness often depicted with death. The mother has left her son with warmth found both from the light and from the clothes she weaved him. The only things that survive the harsh winter of the poem are what cannot be destroyed or what nobody wants: “a chair we couldn’t break,
And the harp with a woman’s head” (61-62). The mother dies in the end, not because she was destroyed, but because of too much want. Ultimately a higher being than her son
won the bid for her life — God wanted her in death. The harp with the woman’s head cannot be destroyed, just as the mother refused to completely let go of her desires and sung while weaving. Although nobody wants the harp, it still remains a solid symbol throughout the poem. Millay reminds the reader that what the harp symbolizes — women’s ambitions outside of motherhood — will always remain, regardless of whether society accepts it. The poem asks for society to see women as more than one-dimensional, in hope that all women can reach a freedom outside of death.

In narrating “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” through the uncomplicated and simple voice of a young boy, Millay draws a comparison between the mother and son’s relationship and women’s role in society. From the son’s viewpoint, his mother’s only role is to provide for him, and her only occupation is that of his personal seamstress. His mother’s sacrifice is easily accepted and underappreciated. He takes for granted the hard work that goes into weaving clothing and sees it as a natural occurrence. He imagines his clothes instantly materializing like a spider whose intricate web seems to magically appear: “Through my mother’s hand. I saw the web grow, And the pattern expand” (90-92). The task of weaving is belittled as the son lists each piece of clothing: “a child’s jacket” (93), “and another one” (96), “a red cloak” (97), “a pair of breeches” (102), “a pair of boots” (104), “a little cocked hat” (105), “a pair of mittens” (106) and “a little blouse” (107). Minor attention is paid to the details or craftsmanship of the work. What could be portrayed as an art form is instead taken as a mindless task. Describing the blouse as “little” makes it sound as if it is doll size. The word “pair” gives boots and breeches the singular form, undermining the fact that twice as much work was required to create two of each item. The mother is clearly overworked; the clothing “piled up beside
her” (124), “toppling to the skies” (125). But the mother does not complain — or rather the son hears no complaint from her. The son never thanks his mother for “the clothes of a king’s son” (125). He is his mother’s prince and his clothing (or her love) is his natural-born right. Like his hat, the son is “cocked” and overconfident, thinking his sex makes him deserving of a royal role.

Freud’s Oedipus complex appears in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” as a way in which Millay examines mother/son relationships. Adrienne Rich defines the Freudian Oedipus complex in “Mother and Son, Woman and Man”:

For the male child, Freud believed the Oedipus complex to consist of the process whereby a little boy first experiences strong sexual feelings for his mother, then learns to detach and differentiate himself from her, to identify as a male with his father instead of perceiving him as a rival, and finally to go on to a point where his erotic instincts can be turned toward a woman other than his mother. Freud thought that the boy’s infantile sexual feelings for his mother create anxiety in him that his jealous father will punish by castration. The ideal resolution of the Oedipus complex is for the boy to give up his attachment to his mother, and to internalize and identify with his father, whom he recognizes as superior in power.

This definition plays out as the son in Millay’s poem struggles with what appears to be an almost sexual relationship with his mother. Sitting (apparently naked since he lacks clothing) in his mother’s lap, the young boy is at first “happy” (45) to be so close to his
mother. He quickly though questions their relationship in the following stanza: “But there was I, a great boy, / And what would folks say / To hear my mother singing me / To sleep all day, / In such a daft way?” (47-51). An act that was once “silly” in an innocent and sweet way has now become “daft” or foolish. This scene marks the son’s turn from his mother. The son later says, “I cried myself to sleep” (67). He no longer looks to his mother for comfort. He now sees his mother as someone apart from himself. The Oedipus complex reaches its resolution in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” as the son twice identifies the clothing his mother weaved as being for “a king’s son” (99 and 125). Despite the fact that his father is dead and absent from the poem, the son still chooses to identify with his father. “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” appears to be Millay’s criticism of what Rich describes as being the Oedipus complex’s fundamental assumption:

The two-person mother-child relationship is by nature regressive, circular, unproductive, and that culture depends on the son-father relationship. All that the mother can do for the child is perpetuate a dependency which prevents further development. Through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the boy makes his way into the male world, the world of patriarchal law and order. (8)

Millay’s use of a male narrator is vital to the reading of “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” as a piece of feminist writing. Growing up, Millay went almost entirely by Vincent, her nickname. Raised by her liberal single-mother, Cora Millay, Millay was free to explore different gender roles, and it was not unusual for Millay to imagine herself as a
male character. Her mother “brought her up . . . like a son—to be self-reliant, fearless and ambitious” (264), quotes Walter Minot in “Millay’s ‘Ungrafted Tree’: The Problem of the Artist as Woman.” Millay saw her mother as a strong female role model and would often credit Cora, who was a singer and artist, for her own poetic career. Despite her strong relationship with her mother, Millay never wanted to have children. Critics and biographers agree that the son and the mother in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” represent Vincent (Edna) and Cora. Describing the poem’s mother/son relationship in “Her Mother’s Voice,” Lisa Myers refers to Silverman’s negative Oedipus complex, which is similar to Freud’s Oedipus complex but in this case, the little boy acts like a girl. He is affectionate toward his father, and jealous and hostile toward his mother. The son in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” is to be interpreted as a young Millay. But this is complicated by the fact that Millay, too, was fatherless yet never developed any apparent hostility toward her mother. Millay is calling for readers to reexamine their own parental relationships. Rich appeals for what may be a similar rethinking in a way that can perhaps be read as putting Millay’s poetic voice into prose form:

The pain, floundering, and ambivalence our male children experience is not to be laid at the doors of mothers who are strong, non-traditional women; it is the traditional fathers who—even when they live under the same roof—have deserted their children hourly and daily. We have to recognize, at this moment in history, as through centuries past, that most of our sons are—in the most profound sense—virtually fatherless. (11)
In choosing a male narrator for “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver,” Millay undermines gender roles in favor of androgynous perspective. “Millay,” writes Andrea Powell Wolfe in “Chasing the ‘Coloured Phantom’: Gender Performance as Revealing and Concealing Modernist Ideology in Millay’s Sonnets,” “undermined these prevailing assumptions by presenting herself to the world as feminine, often to the point of excess, yet willing to play the traditionally aggressive masculine role in love relationships” (155). Millay was very much in the public eye during the height of her career. A celebrated It Girl, she was glamorous and radical, a sexually free and independent woman. But at the same time, her poetry was a candid representation of her inner self. Millay’s various personas unfold in “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver.” The reader can understand Millay to be a male, a son, a mother, a woman and a daughter. Millay breaks down the boundaries that confine women, using her public persona to spread the message that women cannot be neatly defined or categorized. But modernism rejected the sense of community that Millay’s poetry provoked in women. “The alienation of affection and the personal that was modernism was bound to reject Millay, as it rejected in a larger sense the claims of women and sentimentalism to power and value” (Clark 146). As a feminist writer, Millay likely would choose in turn to reject the modernist movement.

Millay’s strong opposition to modernism is seen through her writing of “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver.” Critics have often faulted Millay’s writing (and female writing in general) for its sentimental tone and rejected it on account of a lack of intellect. More specifically, modern critics deemed “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” to be “a pathetic, curiously wishful little thing” (Clark 151). Modernism, in the age of new poets like Eliot, was “defined by the failure of relationship and the antiheroics of the poetic
loner” (Clark 143). Modernist poetry was an impersonal and serious art, whereas Millay’s writings were about love and focused on sentimental subjects. During the height of the modernist movement, Millay “was writing in a way that is easily understood, that invites the reader in, that makes community with the reader and tries to heal alienation” (Clark 143).

“The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” provides examples of the ways in which Millay used her poetry to appeal to the readers (a large many of whom were women) that were alienated by modernism. Millay’s opposition to modernism supports her status as a feminist writer. “Modernism assumes an estrangement between the poem and the reader—difference, not familiarity. Exile, not community” (Clark 145). This type of estrangement has proven to be hazardous to women and the feminist movement. Modernism, with its exiling ways, can be tied to the very sense of the Other that has always alienated women. One reason, according to Simon de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, that women have failed to escape the role of the Other “is that they lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition” (8). As a woman, writing for other women, Millay is attempting to organize women into a community. If Millay were to have joined into the ranks of modernism, she would be contributing to this sense of women as Others and would be submitting to the patriarch’s antifeminist beliefs.

Millay’s choice of form in writing “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” reveals an opposition toward modernism. Modernism marked a turn from traditional and classical form. Millay rejected this change, choosing instead to stick to the traditional ballad form. For the most part, “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” is divided into quatrains marked by a
subtle *abcb* rhyme scheme that soothes the reader. The poem’s nursery rhyme affect makes it easy for the reader, or critic, to overlook the reality of the ballad — a self-sacrificing widowed mother dies thanklessly for her son — in favor of a facile moral. This form imitates how easily women and mothers are dismissed and ignored. In the same way that Millay often wrote in sonnet form, the ballad form “is a fit vehicle to convey her deepest feelings of woman’s victimization. Through it, Millay imaginatively reacts her constant struggle against boundaries” (Fried 230). The traditional ballad form enables Millay to “enter an old text from a new critical direction,” as urged by Adrienne Rich in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” This act helps to redefine woman’s status within literary tradition. And as Rich continues, “This drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Smith 49). Through the act of re-vision, we can join Millay in refusing to remain a part of this self-destructive society.
Works Cited


