Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anne Sexton: The Disruption of Domestic Bliss

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Popular perceptions of Edna St. Vincent Millay do not generally see her as a poet interested in so-called “domestic poetry.” On the contrary, Millay is most commonly described as the female embodiment of the rebellious spirit that marked the 1920s, the “New Woman” of early twentieth-century feminism. Until the late 1970s, the subject of domesticity seemed incompatible with the celebrated images of Millay’s “progressiveness,” “rebelliousness,” or “originality.” But then again, by the 1970s Millay was no longer seen as particularly rebellious or original, and the fact that she had also contributed to the tradition of domestic poetry was not to her advantage. Domesticity may have been an important issue for second-wave feminists, but it was discussed rather selectively and, outside feminist circles, Millay was hardly ever mentioned by literary critics. The taint of “traditionism” did not help Millay’s cause, and the poet’s lifelong exploration of sexuality, femininity and gender stereotypes was somehow not enough to generate sophisticated critical analyses. Since Millay seemed to be a largely traditional poet and a “politically incorrect” feminist model, second-wave feminists preferred to focus on other figures, classified as more modern and more overtly subversive. Scholarly recognition of Millay’s significance within the canon of modern American poetry did not really begin until the 1990s.¹

This paper attempts to resolve some of the contradictions that are still evident in Millay’s critical reception; it will also try to broaden the debate concerning her literary and cultural importance by concentrating on one of the least explored areas of her oeuvre – her domestic poetry. Furthermore,

¹ A few notable exceptions would be Patricia A. Klemans, Jeannine Dobbs, Debra Fried, William Drake and Janet Montefiore.

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I will demonstrate that Millay’s contribution to domesticity and female anxiety had a distinctive impact on the women poets who succeeded her. Focusing primarily on Millay’s influence on Anne Sexton, I will argue that Millay’s handling of those issues played a most instrumental role in the formation of the younger woman’s artistic consciousness, providing her with the necessary tools to articulate frustration, victimization, and enclosure. My purpose is not merely to show the range and extent of Millay’s influence, but to maintain that the earlier poet was among those figures who helped Sexton identify her strongest themes, and thus turned frustration and domestic enclosure into new subjects for women’s writing.

Millay’s reputation as the “New Woman” of the twenties was arguably established with the publication of *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920). The appearance of this collection almost coincided with the introduction of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which extended suffrage to women. Certain long-term social trends began to accelerate – divorce rates increased rapidly, fertility rates declined, approval of extramarital sex had reached its peak by the late 1920s (at least among intellectuals). By 1925, feminist activists could boast that, thanks to their pressure, the Congress had introduced 19 pieces of major legislation expanding women’s rights and benefits. These socio-political changes naturally affected the field of women’s literary production; throughout the 1920s, publishers were rediscovering women’s poetry, and women poets saw themselves as dedicated professionals.

Millay was at the centre of these developments. She was a key figure of the “Jazz Age” and a celebrated Greenwich Village bohemian, eager to experiment with unconventional sexual practices. She displayed a consistent interest in political matters and supported progressive groups and publications, like the *Masses* and the *Liberator*. Millay was also associated with radical feminists and social activists such as Crystal Eastman, Lola Ridge, Emma Goldman, and Genevieve Taggand, and she was the representative example of an artist who made her living exclusively from poetry. At the same time, for all the privileges Millay seemed to possess as the embodiment of the “New Woman,” she found it hard to ignore the social structures that expected even such liberated figures to settle down and marry. The wide circulation of women’s literature and the dissemination of progressive ideas may have been two important steps in the right direction, but certain cultural expectations with respect to sexuality and women’s social function were as

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3 Ibid., xix–xx.
dominant as before. As Nina Miller argues:

The culturally new possibility of an actively desiring woman did not necessarily imply a radical conceptual revision of female sexuality as a whole. In fact … the scientific discovery of women as sexual beings was often presented alongside the discovery of a biological foundation for female passivity or for early marriage. A woman might be a sexual adventurer, but her “nature” demanded that she experience intimacy as submersion in a powerful male Other.4

While Millay was deeply suspicious of certain such discoveries (her distrust of Freudian psychoanalysis, which she saw as “a Teutonic attempt to lock women up in the home and restrict them to cooking and baby-tending” is well known among Millay scholars),5 she nevertheless did decide to marry. Moreover, her anxiety to secure a husband before the age of thirty, her frequent references to herself as “old maid” when this goal was not achieved, and her frustration at her younger sisters’ marriages suggest that Millay had internalized the social stereotypes governing the notion of “femininity” and was willing to conform to society’s expectations. In fact, like most of the women of her circle, the poet seems to have linked marriage with feminism and modernity. As Elaine Showalter explains: “the ‘truly modern women’ … admitted that ‘a full life calls for marriage and children as well as a career’. To be modern meant to want heterosexual love as well as work; neither was sufficient by itself.”6

Though this account is only partly applicable to Millay — since the poet was firmly opposed to having children, continued her sexual (including homo-sexual) experimentations throughout her marriage, and chose a husband who actively promoted her career — it does indicate that Millay could not disregard the social structures her poetry consistently criticized or mocked. Her realization of her only partial liberation is directly associated with her interest in exploring the constraints of domesticity upon women. Millay’s contributions to the tradition of domestic poetry, therefore, should be seen in the light of her recognition of the compromises that women were forced to make in the


1920s and 1930s; Millay’s work provides an excellent commentary on the inflexibility of the social rules and institutions that prevented women from fully enjoying the favorable legislative developments for their sex.

Anne Sexton’s poetic consciousness was developed during the 1950s and 1960s, two decades that had little of the jubilant atmosphere that followed the feminist gains of the early 1920s. On the other hand, several social trends that were particularly strong in the 1950s, such as women’s limited participation in political matters, or the emphasis attached to home and the family, can be traced already in the 1920s and 1930s. Showalter points out that, after the Nineteenth Amendment, feminist activists naively thought that “there were no more major structural changes to be fought for that would affect all women.” Even though “the new women” of the 1920s soon realized that a life combining work, marriage, and motherhood was practically infeasible, they were reluctant to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of American society and “interpreted their inability to find exciting jobs and reliable childcare as personal failures.” In addition, following the failure of women to emerge as a political force after 1920, “pro-women’s legislation and political activism declined steadily until the 1950s.” Women’s gradual recession from the public sphere was also reflected in the diminishing numbers of poetry books published by women in the 1930s, as well as in the limited numbers of literary awards given to female poets.

The above accounts summarize the shift from political activism and common struggle to an age characterized by the increasing isolation of women within the domain of the home; they also illustrate the gradual devaluation of female writers which, in the case of Millay, reached its peak during the 1950s and 1960s, making it especially difficult for women poets like Sexton to reclaim some important female figures that had influenced her work. But the socio-historical period within which Sexton was writing imposed several other constraints upon artists; as Adrienne Rich has written, throughout the 1950s, “the family was in its glory” and, “in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were making careers of domestic perfection.” Prevented by “the loyalties of marriage,” women refrained from voicing “their secret emptiness [and] their frustrations.”

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7 Ibid., 10.
Sexton herself gives a similar picture of this glorification of the family, which persistently encouraged women to stay at home and become good consumers rather than pursue intellectual interests or compete in the public domain:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn’t know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn’t know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. … I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little white fences to keep nightmares out.10

Such descriptions are typical of the situation women found themselves in during the 1950s, and should be seriously considered in any study that attempts to evaluate and understand the poetry produced by the women writers of that period. The overwhelming social pressure on women privileged domesticity and passivity and discouraged ambition or political activism; this pressure produced a poetics intensely grounded on individual experience. Questions such as women’s social function, enclosure, and psychological frustration became again particularly relevant, and the women poets of the period tried to give their own definitions and explore new alternatives that derived directly from the reality they were exposed to. Their contributions should be read both as a continuation of the earlier poets’ efforts to interrogate the social structures that prevented women from exploiting their full creative potential, and as a challenging dialogue with the work of the poets who were most notable in this respect – poets like Edna Millay.

Nevertheless, much as Sexton may have been influenced by the earlier poet, she was for a long time unwilling to acknowledge either the nature or the extent of Millay’s impact. The younger poet was initially afraid of being deemed “the 1950s Millay,” and continuously emphasized the interplay of her work with that of her contemporaries. With respect to domestic writing, the first name that comes to mind would be that of Tillie Olsen, and therefore the Millay echo in this context seems rather hard to define. However, ambivalence toward a particular kind of influence does not necessarily diminish its significance, and Sexton’s accounts of the figures that shaped her work are open to several interpretations (not least because Olsen herself greatly admired Millay). In fact, contrary to the popular critical view that sees her as a poet particularly honest about her literary influences, Sexton has made some comments that leave much space for speculation; the following

excerpt from a memoir which ostensibly focuses on Sylvia Plath is a characteristic example:

I'm sure Sylvia's influences are hidden, as with most of us, and if one feels compelled to name an influence than let us begin with Theodore Roethke. I remember writing to Sylvia ... after The Colossus came out and saying something like: “If you're not careful, Sylvia, you will out-Roethke Roethke,” and she replied that I had guessed accurately and that he had been a strong influence on her work. Believe me, no one ever tells one's real influences – and certainly not on the radio or the TV or in interviews .... As a matter of fact, I probably guessed wrong and she was lying to me. She ought to. I'd never tell anyone and she was smarter than I am about such hidden things. Poets will not only hide influences. They will bury them.

It requires indeed little effort to see that what Sexton says of Plath is equally applicable to her – after all, toward the end Plath seems to fade in the background and the memoir gives way to a general discussion of literary influence. Sexton's words not only emphasize a common practice among poets – the conscious obscuring of influences deemed, for some reason, unfashionable, unacceptable, or unworthy – but also indicate her partial endorsement of this practice. Considering that Sexton was the only poet of the “Confessional” circle who lacked university education (something that made her think that her opinions of other writers carried less value) and, bearing in mind that she tried hard to earn this circle's respect, maintain her credentials as “serious” poet, compete for prestigious literary fellowships, and secure academic teaching posts, it is easy to understand that Millay's influence was precisely the kind of influence Sexton would wish to bury. Furthermore, this wish seems to have been less the result of Millay's diminished scholarly esteem and more the product of Sexton's own anxiety about her originality. If Sexton were to concede that the earlier poet was, in certain ways, behind the very subjects that had made her famous (femininity, psychological frustration, and domestic enclosure), she would endanger her positive critical reception, which had hitherto hailed her for her innovative perspective in the treatment of these subjects. Sexton's only option was to foreground her affiliation between her own work and that of highly respected writers like Lowell, Plath, Olsen, and W. D. Snodgrass. Recognition of Millay's importance would have threatened the younger poet's status; like Plath, Sexton

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“ought to” lie about her influences. Without wishing, therefore, to undermine the affinities between Sexton and her contemporaries, I think that Sexton’s unwillingness to talk about Millay’s role within the context of domesticity and psychological frustration reflects her need to align herself with the critical standards of her literary circle. Sexton seems to have been too eager to talk about other models of domesticity and frustration in order to exorcise her fear of being linked with Millay.

The themes of domesticity and the place of women within the confines of home constitute a major aspect in the work of both Millay and Sexton. Both poets have produced detailed psychological renderings of women trapped in unhappy marriages, women who have been frustrated by strict social codes that valorize docility and submission, women who have been denied any creative outlet. The final part of this discussion will therefore examine Sexton’s repeated attempts to appropriate, complement, and, at the same time, interrogate Millay’s depiction of domestic enclosure by analyzing her response to the earlier poet’s “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree” (1923). Relatively overlooked during Millay’s lifetime, this particular sequence is now considered to be one of the poet’s most accomplished works. Debra Fried, for instance, believes that “new readers of Millay could well begin with ‘Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree’, which gives a truer picture of Millay’s work than does ‘Renascence’”; along the same lines, Gilbert and Gubar have argued that this is Millay’s “finest sonnet sequence,” superior to the celebrated Fatal Interview, and have included all 17 sonnets in their revised edition of the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women.12

In “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree,” Millay tells the story of a failed marriage through the eyes of a woman who had long separated from her husband, yet returns to nurse him after hearing that he is dying. Fried, again, provides a useful summary of the sequence:

The emotional background of the story is implied rather than told, as the woman’s daily tedium of caretaking mixes with reflections on her past. The sequence is largely devoted to an account of the simple tasks the woman performs: hastily gathering wood in a storm, building a reluctant fire, hiding in the cellar from a delivery man and neighbours, scrubbing the kitchen. Gradually these tasks come to emblematize

the emotional history of the marriage, until by the end, with the man’s death, we can piece this unremarkable story together.\textsuperscript{13}

Gilbert and Gubar have traced the influence of Edith Wharton’s \textit{Ethan Frome} and Susan Glaspell’s \textit{Trifles} behind the “Ungrafted Tree.” Millay’s sequence, they write, “explores the privations of a failed marriage with the same subtlety and intensity that mark Wharton’s and Glaspell’s precursor texts.” By choosing to narrate the story through the accumulation of unimportant domestic incidents rather than “melodramatic public events,” Millay “supports Glaspell’s argument that the codes male-defined law supposes to be significant may be less crucial than the language of ‘trivia’ which a feminine hermeneutics can decipher.”\textsuperscript{14} Elaborating on the poet’s possible interaction with other relevant works, Walker believes that Millay may also have had in mind Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour”; for Walker, Millay’s sonnet sequence represents an important declaration of female independence.\textsuperscript{15} Already from the opening sonnet, it is easy to see why the domestic world sketched by Millay has been so highly praised:

So she came back into his house again  
And watched beside his bed until he died,  
Loving him not at all. The winter rain  
Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside,  
Where once her red geraniums had stood,  
Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen;  
The thin log snapped; and she went out for wood,  
Bareheaded, running the few steps between  
The house and shed; there, from the sodden eaves  
Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine,  
Saw the dejected creeping-jinny vine,  
(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stuff blue sleeves  
Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,  
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).\textsuperscript{16}

As Irene Fairley has noticed, from the very beginning Millay informs the reader that “there will be no suspense in the usual sense”; we are told that the husband will die and are therefore asked “to look elsewhere for the

\textsuperscript{13} Fried, 188.  
\textsuperscript{16} Edna St. Vincent Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, ed. Norma Millay Ellis (1976; Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer, 1995), 606–22; the sequence “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree” was originally included in \textit{The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems} (1923).
Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anne Sexton

Millay also demonstrates that there is no love involved in the relationship—the estranged wife returns because she is unable to shake off the sense of duty that still binds her to her husband. The “winter rain” cleverly anticipates the speaker’s feeling of mourning, a feeling, however, that is directed less to the dying husband and more to the woman’s own self. The “rotted stalks” of the “once red geraniums” reflect the loss of passion and its replacement by physical decay, and this atmosphere of stillness and death is further intensified by images suggestive of abandonment and neglect. What is of particular interest, however, is the short flashback toward the end of the sonnet, which poignantly shows the contrast between the disillusioned wife and her younger, former self. This contrast is reinforced by the corresponding change in season (spring, rather than winter) and, more importantly, by the speaker’s reluctance to associate this former self with her current state of being. Millay’s diction stresses distance and alienation rather than identification or integration; the speaker sees herself as “one” naïve young woman who, long ago, had dreams of domestic happiness. The speaker’s refusal to use personal pronouns accentuates the impression of a collective plight, making the reader see that this woman is not “one” in any sense of uniqueness, but “one among the many” who have spent their lives under similar circumstances.

The middle section of the sequence constitutes an extensive flashback, focusing on the couple’s past and presenting the reasons that brought these two people together:

Not over-kind nor over-quick in study
Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful was he,
Who had come into her life when anybody
Would have been welcome, so in need was she.
They had become acquainted this way:
He flashed a mirror in her eyes at school;
By which he was distinguished; from that day
They went about together, as a rule.
She told, in secret and with whispering,
How he had flashed a mirror in her eyes;
And as she told, it struck her with surprise
That this was not so wonderful a thing.
But what’s the odds?—It’s pretty nice to know
You’ve got a friend to keep you company everywhere
you go.

She had forgotten how the August night
Was level as a lake beneath the moon,
In which she swam a little, losing sight
Of shore; and how the boy, who was at noon
Simple enough, not different from the rest,
Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went,
Which seemed to her an honest enough test
Whether she loved him, and she was content.
So loud, so loud the million crickets’ choir ...
So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out and late ...
And if the man were not her spirit’s mate,
Why was her body sluggish with desire?
Stark on the open field the moonlight fell,
But the oak tree’s shadow was deep and black and
secret as well.

Several critics have noticed that the man’s qualities are presented negatively,
but it must be said that Millay’s sophisticated viewpoint does not permit the
reader to idealize the woman either. Though the perspective of the wife
arguably elicits more sympathy, since we are informed that she married this
ordinary youth because she was “so in need” (clarification of whether this
need was psychological or financial would not significantly alter our re-
sponse), Millay implies that the wife is almost as much to blame as the
husband. The former, for instance, is quick to realize that the incident with
the mirror is anything but miraculous, yet “persists in viewing [her husband]
by moonlight rather than by the clear and truthful light of the day.” Trying to
live up to the illusion of “true romance,” the woman eventually understands
that this superficial, youthful eroticism has forced her into an unhappy
marriage. The woman’s bitterness is intensified by her retrospective reali-
atation that it was she who ascribed inflated value to the man’s actions; by
choosing to tell her friends “in secret and with whispering” how “he had
flashed a mirror in her eyes,” she elevated a trivial incident to a position of
unmerited importance. As Fairley puts it, the woman gradually realizes “how
the male gaze or gesture gets validated by the female talk and how telling a
story assures a girl’s social status.”

Nevertheless, Millay refrains from condemning either partner; the con-
cluding lines of the tenth sonnet (“But the oak tree’s shadow was deep and
black and / secret as well”) may create a sinister atmosphere that ties in well
with the bleakness that permeates the sequence, yet they also acknowledge

18 Ibid., 61; see also Gilbert and Gubar, vol. III, 84–5, and Jeannine Dobbs, “Edna St.
Vincent Millay and the Tradition of Domestic Poetry,” Journal of Women’s Studies in Litera-
ture, 1:2 (1979), 89–106.
those parameters in human relationships that often defy explanation or rationalization, such as desire and physical attraction. Early on in the marriage, the woman saw that her husband was not “her spirit’s mate”; still, her body remained “sluggish with desire.” “Sluggish” is a rather strange adjective to accompany desire, and it may have been selected by the poet in order to stress once more the ambiguous feelings involved in this relationship. However, since the meaning of “sluggish” also includes definitions such as “lethargy” or “inactivity,” Millay may have been covertly talking about an unexplained, yet overwhelming physical desire that the speaker cannot understand and come to terms with. The question mark at the end of the sentence not only leaves the matter open, signaling Millay’s wish to draw attention to frustrated female sexuality, but also reflects the speaker’s puzzlement over her conflicting experience. Some things, the poet implies, are simply bound to be “deep,” and “black,” and “secret.”

Sonnet XII provides another moving combination of mundane actuality and introspective meditation; this time, however, the woman’s thoughts are directed to the future:

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed
An ailing child …
She gave her husband of her body’s strength,
Thinking of men, what helpless things they were,
Until he turned and fell asleep at length …
Familiar, at such moments, like a friend,
Whistled far off the long, mysterious train,
And she could see in her mind’s vision plain
The magic World, where cities stood on end …
Remote from where she lay – and yet – between,
Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.

Consistent with the strategy of revealing intimate feelings and thoughts through impersonal, neutral words, Millay has her protagonist refer to her husband as “something asleep beside her,” and to men as “helpless things.” The husband’s physical decline is sharply contrasted to the woman’s hopeful look toward the future; as Dobbs correctly observes, the unsuccessful outcome of the marriage “has not disillusioned the woman in general; she is still affected by the magic of the train’s whistle.” Nevertheless, much as she endorses her protagonist’s untouched capacity of hoping, Millay closes the sonnet by foregrounding the reality the wife has to face; the sick husband may be simply “an ailing child” or “something asleep” but, even so, he does constitute “a wall between [her] and the vitality of the outside
world.” Again Millay’s critique of marriage as an institution that relies primarily on women’s nurturing abilities, restricting their free will and demanding that they put duty above everything, is voiced in no uncertain terms: however diminished the husband’s status may appear by expressions such as “ailing child” or “helpless thing,” his symbolic power has lost little of its former dominance. Even when he is reduced to the undignified state of a man requiring his wife’s strength, his presence nevertheless prevents the wife from pursuing her interests in the outside world, allowing her only brief escapes into the realm of the imagination, denoted by the train’s whistle.

The next sonnet, however (XIII), presents a subtle change of tack: while it retains the themes of domestic drudgery and the wife’s alienation from her husband (now described as “a strange sleeper on a malignant bed”), it draws more attention to the woman’s emerging new consciousness:

From the wan dream that was her waking day,
Wherein she journeyed, borne along the ground
Without her own volition in some way …
Regarding him, the wide and empty scream
Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed,
And all the time not certain if it were
Herself so doing or some one like to her,
From this wan dream that was her daily bread,
Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake –
A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet
did not break!

This sonnet testifies to the accuracy of Fairley’s observation, according to which the wife “has come back to reclaim her submerged self.” The gap between the woman’s superficial self, which mechanically performs the necessary domestic chores, and her dreaming self, becomes wider and wider. The surface reality of domestic submission gradually gives way to an emerging inner reality characterized by hope and resiliency. The child imagery at the end of the sonnet suggests rebirth rather than immaturity or naïveté, and this optimistic conclusion emphasizes Millay’s portrayal of her protagonist as “a survivor with dreams of escape intact.”

The final two sonnets (XVI, XVII), which focus on the death of the husband, are definitely among the most accomplished of the sequence:

The doctor asked her what she wanted done
With him, that could not lie there many days.

19 See also Gilbert and Gubar, vol. III, 85, and Dobbs, 99. 20 See Fairley, 70-1.
And she was shocked to see how life goes on
Even after death, in irritating ways;
And mused how if he had not died at all
‘Twould have been far easier – then there need not be
The stiff disorder of a funeral
Everywhere, and the hideous industry,
And crowds of people calling her by name
And questioning her …
She said at length, feeling the doctor’s eyes,
“I don’t know what you do exactly when a person dies.”

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,
It seemed a curious thing that she had lain
Beside him many a night in that cold bed,
And that had been which would not be again.
From his desirous body the great heat
Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves
Loosened forever. Formally the sheet
Set forth for her today those heavy curves
And lengths familiar as the bedroom door.
She was as one who enters, sly, and proud,
To where her husband speaks before a crowd,
And sees a man she never saw before –
The man who eats his victuals at her side,
Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers,
Unclassified.

The wife’s discomfiture with her husband, even in death, is certainly an interesting feature here: while Millay’s handling of the story aligns her with modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence, the perception of the husband as nothing more than a burden provides a sharp contrast to Lawrence’s short story “Odour of Chrysanthemums”; the widow’s guilt in the latter story has little in common with the attitude of the wife in the “Ungrafted Tree.” Millay’s protagonist feels a curious sense of joy at her husband’s death: "From his desirous body the great heat / was gone at last, … and the taut nerves / Loosened forever.” Bearing in mind that the wife has repeatedly emphasized the force of her own sexual desire, rather than the man’s, phrases such as “great heat” and “taut nerves” probably comment on the loss of the husband’s symbolic power and authority. The long-anticipated freedom and hoped-for power belong “at last” to the wife. Throughout the sequence, the husband was the negative “other” against which the wife had to struggle. His death signals her coming to terms with the past and her final release. The “man she never saw before” is now “not hers, unclassified,” and the woman celebrates the fact that she too “is no longer his and
Millay's impressive rendering of domestic enclosure, combined with her sensitive imagination and insight into the female condition have created, as Dobbs puts it, "one of the most striking portraits of a wife's situation in twentieth-century American poetry." Moreover, Millay's decision to employ the sonnet form in order to talk about domesticity and female enclosure suggests that she wanted, on the one hand, to claim for her subject the respect associated with traditional, classic forms of poetic composition and, on the other, to remap the genre and introduce new themes as permissible material for a sonnet sequence. Irene Fairley argues that, with the "Ungrafted Tree," Millay "goes beyond the genre Debra Fried refers to as 'laden with figurations exclusive to male poetic authority.'" Millay, she continues, "has invented a sonnet to capture the rhythm of thought, to convey the woman's meditation as it is triggered by domestic activity. [Her] project was radical both in its conception ... and also in its interpretation of the sonnet form." Elaborating on this view, Mary B. Moore observes that Millay's sonnets recast form and matter entirely, regendering the male-engendered, Petrarchan sonnet sequence in a feminized, domestic American landscape. ... The female speaker cares for a passive, dying man whose ordinariness represents a kind of American quotidian. ... Morally relative, even amoral at times, Millay espouses an aesthetic that includes rather than excludes, holds in suspension rather than dissolves or resolves, accepts both creation and destruction as elements in poetic making.

Such comments make clear that Millay's innovation is as much technical as it is conceptual; through an intelligent revision of a traditional genre that has all too often presented distorted notions of womanhood, Millay has given an impressively sensitive picture of tiresome domesticity and frustrated hope, ironically commenting on the danger of accepting passively the social pattern that equates marriage with the fulfilment of women's needs. At the same time, her frequent insertions of elements suggestive of possibility, expansion, and personal growth defy the passive endorsement of this pattern. The speaker's ultimate reclaim of her individuality may not be feasible without the husband's death, but Millay's decision to foreground precisely this hard-won individuality gives a very clear idea of the message she wanted to get across to her 1920s audience. Envisaging a future in which marriage will no

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21 Gilbert and Gubar, vol. III, 85; see also Fairley, 72.
22 See Dobbs, 97–9; see also Michael Callon, “Modern American Poetry” website (http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/millay/ungrafted.htm).
23 Fairley, 72.
longer be the only alternative to loneliness, material need, or social acceptance, Millay argues that change can begin gradually and with little things. The willingness to acknowledge past mistakes, the refusal to idealize behavioral models not conducive to one’s psychological balance, and the determination to attain even partial independence, can potentially disrupt the vicious circle of uniformity, compliance, and submission. Millay’s eloquent articulation of these controversial issues furnished poets such as Sexton with substantial material for imitation, revision and appropriation.

Anne Sexton’s contribution within the context of domesticity and female enclosure has been amply recognized; Suzanne Juhasz, for instance, writes:

People responded to her poetry because she had the courage to speak publicly of the most intimate of personal experiences, the ones so many share. She became a spokesperson for the secret domestic world and its pain. And her audience responded as strongly as it did, not only because of what she said but because of how she said it.25

Although Juhasz’s observations are equally applicable to Millay, the latter’s domestic poetry began to attract scholarly attention relatively late, compared to her love poetry. Sexton, however, seems to have been one of the first poets who saw beyond this critical focus, gradually acknowledging the groundbreaking path of the earlier poet with respect to female frustration, domestic entrapment, and marital failure. “The Farmer’s Wife,” for example, one of Sexton’s first published poems (Bedlam, 1960), reads almost like a compressed version of Millay’s “Ungrafted Tree”:

From the hodge porridge
of their country lust,
their local life in Illinois,
where all their acres look
like a sprouting broom factory,
they name just ten years now
that she has been his habit;
as again tonight he’ll say
honey bunch, let’s go
and she will not say how there
must be more to living
than this brief bright bridge
of the raucous bed or even
the slow braille touch of him
like a heavy god grown light,

that old pantomime of love
that she wants although
it leaves her still alone,
built back again at last,
minds apart from him, living
her own self in her own words
and hating the sweat of the house
they keep when they finally lie
each in separate dreams
and then how she watches him,
still strong in the blowzy bag
of his usual sleep while
her young years bungle past
their same marriage bed
and she wishes him cripple, or poet,
or even lonely, or sometimes,
better, my lover, dead.26

Much of the poem’s effect on the reader is based on Sexton’s skilful use of imagery and diction, which allows us to visualize this rendering of domestic unhappiness. Just like Millay, Sexton relies little upon explicit descriptions, preferring sharp touches of linguistic understatement. In the end, however, nothing is left unsaid, and the emotional lives of the poem’s characters are laid bare with an admirable degree of honesty and sensitivity.

Like Millay, Sexton begins by introducing the locality, a rural district of Illinois where “all their acres look like a sprouting broom factory,” directly analogous with Millay’s bleak New England Village. According to Judith Nichols-Orians, this introduction comments not only on the couple’s intimate life, but also on the wife’s attitude toward the land. The factory, she argues, “suggests poverty, entrapment, back-breaking work. ‘Sprouting broom factory’ suggests more than a bleak landscape; it suggests a bleak future.”27 The back-breaking work recalls the endless wood-carrying and daily housework of the wife in the “Ungrafted Tree,” and the monotonous landscape of the “sprouting broom factory” echoes the rotted stalks and dejected vines of Millay’s opening sonnet. In the earlier sequence, the wife was initially “musing ahead” to a life of domestic happiness, symbolized by her wish for blossoming seeds. The frustration of her hopes is reproduced in

Sexton’s portrait of the farmer’s wife, who can see ahead only the meaningless repetition of an unrewarding life (“all their acres” look alike).

The most important element of Sexton’s poem, however, is the careful delineation of the wife’s feelings for her husband. What brought these two people together, she writes, was “their country lust,” a phrase that suggests merely an indefinite hunger, rather than old-fashioned, romantic love. Wife and husband have nevertheless been together for “just ten years,” an ironic statement that hardly needs further analysis, considering the wife’s perception of herself as nothing more than her husband’s “habit.” Already in the first seven lines, Sexton leaves little space for hope; words such as “habit” clearly show that no delight, surprise, affection, or mutual enjoyment can emerge from the couple’s union. Following Millay’s protagonist in “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree,” who, out of a similar, indefinite need married someone “not over-kind,” yet insisted on keeping alive the illusion of love even after realizing that her husband was not “her spirit’s mate,” the wife here cannot break loose from “that old pantomime of love / that she wants / although it leaves her still alone.” At the same time, like the earlier wife (who attentively listens for the whistle of the “mysterious train” and dreams of “the magic World / … remote from where she lay”), the woman in Sexton’s poem thinks that “there must be more to living”; “minds apart” from her husband, she lives “her own self in her own words.” The poet’s diction poignantly illuminates the distance between the two people, emphasizing the wife’s alienation from everything around her.28 The woman’s hate of the “raucous bed” and the “sweat of the house / they keep when they finally lie / each in separate dreams” parallels the feelings of the woman in Millay’s sequence, her own separate dreams and wishes, and her characterization of her husband as “a strange sleeper on a malignant bed.” As in Millay’s work, the husband’s presence becomes less and less noticeable, freeing up more space for the wife’s meditations on her empty existence.

There is, however, a significant difference in Sexton’s poem, and this is no other than the element of death. Despite the man’s gradual disappearance from the foreground, Sexton does not provide her protagonist with a final release, such as the release experienced by Millay’s persona with the death of her husband. The husband here does not die; as the title implies, this woman will always remain “the farmer’s wife,” unable to escape trivialization and domestic drudgery. Nevertheless, the psychological climax of Sexton’s poem directly echoes the ending of the earlier work; watching the man’s sleep, the wife “wishes him cripple, or poet, / or even lonely, or sometimes / better,

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28 Ibid., 191–92.
my lover, dead,” a shocking statement which parallels the concluding poem of the “Ungrafted Tree” (“gazing upon him now, severe and dead ... / small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified”). Sexton’s perspective draws attention to the perpetuation of the woman’s situation, rather than her potential for escape; the farmer’s wife will continue to be her husband’s habit, in other words, his and classified. Like the earlier poet, Sexton raises disturbing questions about the isolation and unhappiness that many women experience in their everyday lives, condemning the social structures that restrict women in a manner that pays tribute to Millay’s skill and sensitivity.

Sexton seems to have chosen Millay’s sequence as a point of reference not only because the earlier poet had given voice to her speaker’s most intimate and disturbing wishes with an admirable degree of honesty (the wife’s joy at her husband’s death is presented in no uncertain terms), but primarily because she wanted to show that the social conditions responsible for the oppression of women had not changed significantly since Millay’s time. By using several identifiable features of the earlier poet’s work, Sexton invites this thought-provoking comparison and simultaneously exposes the inflexibility of social institutions. In this somewhat paradoxical way, Sexton succeeds in making domestic enclosure a new subject for women writing in the 1950s and 1960s: castigating society’s turn to regression, rather than progress (after all, the 1920s character of Millay’s sequence did find the courage to leave), she argues that a re-examination of the social structures that assign women’s roles is both urgent and essential, if marriage is to mean something more than a “habit” or “an old pantomime.”

Equally important in Sexton’s domestic world is the symbol of the bed; the “malignant bed” of the “Ungrafted Tree,” an expression heavily loaded with all sorts of connotations about domestic unhappiness, physical decay and repressed death wishes appears also in the younger poet’s work, even in poems that can be classified as love lyrics. In “Now,” for instance, Sexton ostensibly narrates an erotic encounter in what seems to be a typical carpe diem poem. She concludes, however, with the particularly ambiguous lines:

Now it is time to call attention
   to our bed, a forest of skin
where seeds burst like bullets. ... 
The blood smell is here and the blade and its bullets
Your lung is waiting in the death market.
Your face beside me will grow indifferent.
Darling, you will yield up your belly and be
cored like an apple. ...
The shoemaker will come and will rebuild this room. He will lie on your bed and urinate and nothing will exist.29

It is interesting to observe that as the imagery becomes more violent and the fantasies of destruction and annihilation more disturbing, Sexton shifts from the initial “our bed” to “your bed”; the latter will cease to exist after its owner has been dismembered in “the death market” and later “cored like an apple.” The ultimate symbol of this problematic union, the bed, is not just destroyed, but also defiled in terms that suggest the speaker’s contempt (“the shoemaker will come … and … lie on your bed and urinate”). Appropriating two of the earlier poet’s most characteristic symbols of marital failure and repressed anxiety (the bed and the death-bearing lover), Sexton creates a particularly evocative portrait of a love-hate relationship. The force of the poem’s imagery, the emphasis on the man’s physical disintegration, and the immediacy with which the speaker calls attention to the once shared bed, further demonstrate Sexton’s insistence on exposing women’s circumscribed roles within erotic relationships, and her need to argue for social change.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, Millay often seems to be arguing that the figure of the broken man (a recurrent trope in her poetry) signifies not only male defeat, but also “the destructiveness of masculinist history and the concealed misogyny of chivalric romance.”30 Sexton’s attraction to Millay relies heavily on the younger poet’s endorsement of the above standpoint; the forceful tone and violent imagery of “Now” function within an almost identical framework. Like Millay, Sexton concentrates on the portrayal of male defeat by reversing the reader’s expectations, gradually undercutting all those elements that would suggest a conventional chivalric romance. The dismembered man at the end indicates the woman’s symbolic victory and suggests that masculinist idealizations of feminine tenderness and docility can indeed be disrupted.

This imagery of physical dismemberment and psychological mutilation is consistently present in Sexton’s work; another typical example would be “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman,” a poem that presents a man who “puts his bones back on” after the sexual act. Though this poem is usually read as describing the illicit relationship of a married man with another woman, it can also be approached as a further exploration of marriage and domesticity, emphasizing once again the parallel, yet separate, lives.

30 Gilbert and Gubar, vol. III, 86.
of the two partners. The poem’s strength arguably lies in Sexton’s rendering of the wife’s loneliness:

It’s a little Walden.
She is private in her breathbed
as his body takes off and flies,
flies straight as an arrow.
But it’s a bad translation.
Daylight is nobody’s friend.
God comes in like a landlord
and flashes on his brassy lamp.
Now she is just so-so.
He puts his bones back on,
turning the clock back an hour.
She knows flesh, that skin balloon,
the unbound limbs, the boards,
the roof, the removable roof.
She is his selection, part-time!
You know the story, too! Look!
when it is over he places her,
like a phone, back on the hook.31

Sexton’s opening captures both the commonness of the experience she is about to describe, and the limited importance attached to it. “It’s a little Walden,” she declares, that is to say, an experience as familiar as Thoreau’s celebrated rendering of a life free from social restrictions, and yet, “a little Walden”; the plight of a woman whose life is defined precisely by the restrictions of strict social structures cannot claim greatness or recognition. It remains marginal and trivial.

The discrepancy in the experience of the two partners is suggested by the different words and images associated with them: the husband’s body “takes off and flies, / straight as an arrow”: Sexton’s meaningful repetition of the verb “fly” indicates the man’s freedom. The man is clearly linked with the outside world of adventure and action. The woman, by contrast, only “knows flesh, … / the unbound limbs, the boards, / the roof, the removable roof.” Her world does not extend beyond the husband’s body and her domestic duties. On the literal level, the “roof” may be “removable,” but the wife knows very well that she lacks the resources that will allow her to remove herself from this environment. The imagery here underlines oppression and enclosure, rather than activity, and it is precisely this imagery of claustrophobia, tiresome repetition and lack of excitement which suggests that the couple in the poem may well be husband and wife. Defined

31 Sexton, Complete Poems, 196.
exclusively by the walls of her home and the duties to her husband, the wife can only wait for an unfriendly daylight that will signal the beginning of another “bad translation” of domestic bliss. Her “breathbed” recalls Millay’s and Sexton’s fascination with the “deathbed” in several such poems, and the younger poet’s statement about the woman being the man’s selection uncomfortably echoes the flirtation incident (and only “part-time” happiness) of the couple in the “Ungrafted Tree.” The unhappy relationship of the earlier pair resonates behind Sexton’s poem, and her conviction that the gap between the experience of husband and wife is “a bad translation” of the meaning of marriage summarizes the message of both poets. In both works, the focus is again on loneliness, stagnation, and submerged hostility, the inevitable outcome of a life pattern that discourages women from caring for their husbands and homes “part time.”

The commonly accepted interpretation of “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman” reads the “other woman” as the man’s mistress, rather than wife. It is interesting to observe that such a reading is essentially no different from the previous one. Like the wife, the other woman is presented in terms that emphasize her dependency on the man; she too is described as the man’s “part-time selection” – in other words, it is not the man who is her selection. Sexton again stresses the woman’s replaceability and temporal appeal. She is not needed as an individual, but as a functional, impersonal object that can be placed “like a phone, back on the hook” once its function is over. Sexton seems to have purposefully left the identity of the “other woman” open, in order to address as many (women) readers as possible: “You All Know the Story,” she insists. She attempts to erase the boundaries between wife and mistress by showing that the two roles share more than is commonly acknowledged. The wife may be granted (an often dubious) social recognition, but, for the man, her role is not significantly different from that of the mistress: both women will ultimately be judged according to their willingness to remain someone’s selection, and to please that someone “part time.”

By allowing a great number of women to recognize themselves behind this situation, Sexton simultaneously appropriates Millay’s well-known, all-inclusive strategies, and makes domestic unhappiness a new subject for women’s writing. Drawing attention to the similarities between the socially endorsed (wife) and socially sanctioned (mistress) possibilities for women, Sexton reveals the limitations of Millay’s “marriage versus individuality” model in the “Ungrafted Tree.” Female individuality, she argues, will always remain undervalued unless it is accompanied by the abolishment of cultural stereotypes that take for granted women’s passivity and sexual availability.
At the same time, Sexton’s reference to *Walden* in the beginning of “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman” shows that she was engaged in a task very similar to Millay’s: the younger poet’s decision to take as her starting point a classic text of male adventure, openness and possibility, and contrast it with the “trivial” account of a woman’s domestic life, brings to mind Millay’s intention to revise a poetic tradition that has consistently overlooked or distorted the experience of women. Like the earlier poet, Sexton claims both the higher literary status linked with male writers and “male” themes, and attempts to break the silence that surrounds the “female,” “inferior” subjects by insisting that, like *Walden*, the story of marital failure is equally well known. (You know the story too!)

Ernest J. Smith has written that the time is now right for reading Millay anew, “both for her own gift, and for the gift she passed to a later generation of American poets.”32 As regards Sexton, Millay’s gift is not so difficult to recognize: the earlier poet provided her successor with remarkably rich material, ranging from intimate, hitherto undervalued explorations of the female self, to depression and vulnerability, and more sophisticated analyses of domesticity and psychological frustration. By arguing that women’s enforced domesticity was partly behind popular notions of women’s psychological instability, Millay prepared the ground for a new generation of poets. Her outspokenness and unpredictable imagery seem to have been particularly appreciated by Sexton, who quickly recognized that Millay was not merely the celebrated “naughty girl” of the 1920s. Expanding upon the earlier poet’s themes, Sexton established most convincingly the connection between enclosure, victimization, and psychological dysfunction. She wrote about oppressive domesticity during an era that advocated social progress, yet largely refused to grant women the privileges of this progress. By combining Millay’s critique with her own perceptiveness and skill, Sexton simultaneously took up the argument for social change, and turned domesticity and the disruption of domestic bliss into new subjects for women’s poetry.

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