Poetic Language and Gender Semiotics in Edna St. Vincent Millay

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Abstract. The prolific literary production of the American poet, playwright and feminist activist Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was overlooked by critics and scholars up to the last decades of the twentieth century. Millay was for several years the symbol of the New Woman of the 1920s. Her poetic language and her rebellious attitude were the perfect trigger for a huge amount of American teenagers who were tired of the inherited moralist social norms and conservative moors of their society. Millay's fresh and revitalizing lines bespeak mainly the popular will to undermine the traditional gender roles by means of a combination of conservative poetic patters and subversive ideas.

Keywords: Edna St. Vincent Millay, poetic language, semiotics, intermediality

1. Introduction

The American poet, actress and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was one of the most emblematic and charismatic female writers of the Roaring Twenties. Her skill with the verse and her insurgent personality soon placed her among the favorite poets of the young Americans of the early 20th century. As an actress she joined the Provincetown Players, where some of her plays were performed. In 1923 she married Eugen Jan Boissevain, a Dutch businessman who left his career to manage Edna's. They moved together to a 300-acres farm near Austerlitz that they called: "Steepletop" (*Selected Poetry* vi). Her open treatment of formerly taboo topics such as homosexual love soon turned her into a poet who held the voice of youngsters in America who, back then, started to enjoy the moment of glory of the USA, of freedom and of the emergence of the idea of the New Woman. In fact, it must be said, Millay was a social activist who eagerly aimed at trespassing the traditional role ascribed to women – i.e., the domestic sphere –, however, some of her later poetry points at an incipient change in her mentality. In fact, the utterly rebellious tone of her poetry and the traditional lyrism in her poems called the attention of one influential poet, scholar and editor of *Poetry* magazine Harriet Monroe, who compared Millay with the immortal Sappho of Lesbos, calling the former: "the greatest woman poet since Sappho" (*Early Poems* 156).

One of the most intimate and illustrating accounts of this type of situations (too common in her life) is described in the book: *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2001) by Daniel Mark Epstein. Epstein tells with impressive detail of a curious meeting between Millay and John Peale Bishop around the year 1921, by the time he fell desperately in love with her. Playing with her two lovers – one recently gone away from her, Edmund Wilson, and the other one eager to win her heart, Bishop – was a pastime in which she indulged frequently at a time when she enjoyed great social and critical appraisal (Epstein 146-147). As Epstein narrates in his biography of

Millay, Bishop, deceived from her ill-natured love as he was, even claimed that her desire was akin to that of a man's (Epstein 151). This statement is as true for her personal, private life (the female writer) as it is for her poetic 'I' (her poetic persona). Her poem "Witch-Wife" visibly relates the love triangle of these three authors when Millay, assuming a male persona in this poem deplores that "she will never be all mine" (ll. 2, 12) because the epitome of the New Woman is unattainable for the narrator.

Regarding Millay's lifestyle, it may be said that it was of an odd nature: some paradoxes in her personality such as her will to get married before the age of thirty counteracted the liberal and feminist ideals that she projected in her writing. In his book: *Blood Too Bright: Floyd Dell Remembers Edna St. Vincent Millay* Jerri Dell gathers many texts written by her grandfather, the American scholar and writer Floyd Dell in which this writer remembers Edna's charms and says that they most probably stem from her "being a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde" (Dell n/p) in relation to the baffling opposites (e.g., harlot and nun) in her poem "The Singing-Woman." The poem that this study examines offers paradoxical views on the nature of female subjectivity. "Witch-Wife" describes a woman whose physical attributes make them appealing (i.e., her hair, her sweet talk and candid manners). Those same properties make her dangerous for her lover.

Halfway between the Edwardian style and the modern times she incarnates, Millay found her place in the literary and artistic scene of the early 20th century. As Robert Johnson put it in "A Moment's Monument" from Freedman's book: *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, the connection of Millay with the Victorian era stands on the basis of the composition of the sonnet: "Victorian thinking holds that the sonnet can stand as the moment's 'monument.' Millay's sonnets stand as monuments to the very attempt of the mind to erect a stable insight of words, while experience seems ever to be slipping away" (125). This is the reason why Millay combines its loose and careless tone within the parameters of the sonnet and yet maintaining the interest in the most intimate and private experience in all her poems.

Some of her poems are the literary evidence that exemplifies the immensely free personality and manners of this young American. In many of her works, Millay situates her poetic voice on the side of the female character. For instance, one of the clearest cases of female characterization of a traditionally male narrator appears in her poem: "An Ancient Gesture," where the poetic voice tells of the myth of the Odyssey from Penelope's eyes. From the very first lines of the poem, Millay clearly states that this old story no longer belongs to the (male) hero, and that the same obstacles and sadness that Ulysses felt when he left his home and his wife may be compared to hers upon his departure. Thus the poem begins: "I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron: / Penelope did this too" (ll. 1-2). In this poem, the emphasis is put on the depth and truth of her feelings as a woman, long neglected by critics and readers of this myth throughout history in favor of those of the male adventurer and hero, Odysseus. Much as Bishop had said about Millay when he complained that she 'desired' as a man would do, her female protagonist also suffers, but hers are real tears, and his are the echo of her misery, since: "He learned it from Penelope... / Penelope, who really cried" (ll. 16-17).

In another poem, Millay does, however, deal with topics such as love deception and disappointment, as in: "She is Overheard Singing," in which the female voice claims that her "true love's a rover!" (l. 4) after she enumerates the good and bad qualities of the lovers of a group of women: Sue, Prue and Agatha. Interestingly, this poem shares the 'melodic' tone with "The Singing-Woman" as both female narrators speak of personal situations while expanding their experiences beyond their own lives with the use of the general female voice.[1] This is a literary resource which, as mentioned before, owes very much to the ancient Classical poets like Homer. Their narrative poems carry with them the voices of almost all its characters and still resonate in 20th century poetry, as Millay's lyrism proves. She detaches herself from the later poetic style of some American writers such as the American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich who provided a great dimension to female matters in poems like: "Translations," where she claims that any woman from any place in the world is "obsessed / with Love, our subject" (ll. 7-8), giving voice to all women.

This article intends to examine Millay's poetry from a literary feminist perspective together with an intermedial approach to her poem: "Witch-Wife." For this aim, the first section in this research draws primarily on the notions of the semiotic *chora* as defined by Julia Kristeva, a concept which is closely connected with her theory of the symbolic space and the semiotic in language and in poetry, two notions that are discussed in the second section. The third part studies the role of women in nature as presented in folktales and popular culture based on Clarissa Pinkola Estés' book: *Women Who Run with the Wolves*: *Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. In this section, the archetype of the witch is compared to that of the fairy in Millay's semi-autobiographical poem: "The Singing-Woman from the Wood's Edge." To the former analysis, the fourth part of this study adds an interdisciplinary analysis of "Witch-Wife" as adapted to the comic format by the graphic artist Julian Peters in order to find and interpret new readings of Millay's poetry. Finally, the overall conclusions round up the main statements and ideas explored hereafter aiming to provide modern light to the life and poetry of this American poet.

2. The core of identity: a vessel in invisible ties

Poetry unfolds in the realm of signifiers – the linguistic signs – which point at signifieds that do not necessarily pre-exist their linguistic expression or that do not exist at all. This is the case of the poem discussed in hereafter, which presents a veridical woman in imaginary terms (comparing her with a witch). The case of "The Singing-Woman" shows a real woman (for the description, we could believe that she may actually exist) but she is certainly not real inasmuch as she is described as a witch. Hence, she is not true: the characters is real (she presents veridical attributes) but the analogies and metaphors use by the persona bespeak an unreal character (a witch). There is to a certain extent mimesis operating here as we have "the construction of an object [a poem with its fantasy elements], not

[1] For a more extensive analysis of the relevance of women in Millay's poetry as presented autobiographically, see Abril-Hernández "Revisiting Edna St. Vincent Millay, the Forgotten Authoress who Marked a Generation" (complete reference at the end of this article).

according to truth but to *verisimilitude*, to the extent that the object is posited as such (hence separate, noted but not denoted); it is, however, internally dependent on a subject of enunciation who is unlike the transcendental ego in that he does not suppress the semiotic *chora* but instead raises the *chora* to the status of signifier, which may or may not obey the norms of grammatical locution. Such is the *connoted* mimetic object" (Kristeva 57). Meaning in these instances is moving in a semiotic flow that implies the existence of semiotic language (this notion will be examined in depth later on). In "Witch-Wife" Millay subverts the real image she depicts with the very title of the poem.

These poetic inferences, interpretations and cross-cultural dialogue with the poet who imagined these lines come about in the space introduced by the *chora*. In her definition of this notion Kristeva draws on Plato's philosophy of the boundless movement of energy that enables growth, life: "we borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (Kristeva 25). Thus, we come to perceive the need to hold poetry as the central system of communication in order to ensure the openness of the signifying chain of signs that, in the hands of a poet, generate the deepest and most accurate representation of the organic essence of the world. Being free was always Millay's premise in her personal life as well as in her art. Her rebellious attitude was nonetheless, not a drawback but the impulse that fueled her creative genius. She even dares the passing of time in her poem: "Midnight Oil": "The years that Time takes off my life, / He'll take from the other end!" (ll. 3-4), which holds a challenging attitude towards the ravages of time and transforms them into the momentum for her artistic desire to be remembered, immortalized through her poetry. The linguistic signs in this poem are the material traces of the *chora* which constantly renew and re-generate the meaning potential of every line.

In "Witch-Wife" the motility that characterizes the semiotics of the *chora* are symbolized by the wavy effect in the lines of this poem: the stylistic arrangements of the twelve lines that make up this poem offer a tantalizing movement with all even lines indented to the right. This shifting of the lines on the page offers a hypnotizing flow of the letters in the poem. The left-and-right movement is also, in a way, a representation of the *chora* since it makes visible the movement beneath the lines representing the space of dynamism and perpetual change. Ruth Robbins declares in her book *Literary Feminisms* that: "in as much as the *chora* 'is' anything, it is a metaphor and a rhetorical device which expresses the idea that meaning may exist in places where it cannot be defined or abstracted" (130). Indeed, in the case of this poem and of poetry in general, the place which encapsulates meaning and the impossibility to define it is the underlying force of the poetic language. In other words, this space of constant renewal of meaning bears with it the capacity to call upon things which are not there and which very probably only exist in the poet's mind. The *chora* is, in this respect, the asynchronous connection between the creating mind and the reader immersed in the rhythmic musicality of a poem.

In reading this poem, the possible interpretations multiply as we come to compare it with the extrovert, extravagant and temperamental personality of Millay in her youngest age. As Goddu claims in her biography: "Vincent had hair the color of fire and a personality to match. From her earliest years, she was a girl

of strong emotions – exuberant laughter and intense rage. There was never anything calm about Vincent; her sisters used to say that she had a bee chasing her. In her fury she could be terrifying" (n/p). With such a bustling desire to live and learn, Millay was unsurprisingly one of the leading 'modern women' at the bohemian town of Greenwich Village and her fame as an "It Girl" (Goddu n/p) only raised after her first collections of poetry. Her life was certainly an unlimited source of inspiration for her poetry, sometimes even dedicating her sonnets to her sisters such as "To Kathleen," where Millay reflects upon the feeble life of a poet who has to "starve, freeze, and fashion verses" (l. 3) since only love for her family and for the beauty of the world urge her to address her poem: "to / Such things as flowers and song and you," (l. 3-4) in reference to her sister.

The *chora* in the poem "Witch-Wife" holds a not-so-evident connection with the rebel young Millay of her youth, who has grown to be an independent woman, a 'witch.' The *chora* here is thus an endless thread that connects the young, naughty child she was, the whimsical grown-up she was at the moment of writing this poem, and the wicked witch she portrays in it. There is a continuum between these three identities which, in fact, makes readers and critics alike envision a larger side to this playful and cheerful member of the Greenwich Village group of artists among which she felt in her element. We cannot separate the three subjects in Millay stated before from the woman we know given that each one adds something to her subject in process, which is the essence of the *chora*: to enable a space for the organic growth and expression of our evolution in life and through art. This poem and its semioses represent the *chora* for the side of her subjectivity that she wanted to project to the public: the child, the woman and the witch are all one and the same Millay in different periods of her life.

For Kristeva the *chora* is "no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him" (Kristeva 28). Indeed, at no point are subjects in a stage of stasis as regards their subjectivity – for which it is called a process of becoming – but we sometimes do have the impression that there is a certain stillness. The fine pen of poets uncovers the incessant flow of semiotic resignifications (i.e., the invisible *chora*) underneath the seemingly undisrupted subject. This poem states and negates simultaneously as it mentions and elicits the identity of the speaker, the narrator and the mysterious woman. Therefore, the number of possible meanings ascribed to them multiplies, resulting in an increasing chain of semiotic resignifications that perpetually regenerates its poetic external referents. The next section deepens in the possibility of a seemingly static system of meaning (i.e., written language) to offer an array of mutable meanings, that is, the rapport between the symbolic and the semiotic applied to this poem.

3. The unexplicit symbolic and the organic semiotic in "Witch-Wife"

This section turns to the artistic outcome of the creative process of the subject's self-expression in literature in close connection with the poetic language. This point delves with the two flows of semiotic meaning at stake in any creative process: the semiotic (related to women) and the symbolic (related to men) from

Kristeva's theory. Women have, admittedly, been regarded as life-giving bodies more than as creators of art, an interesting correlation between the artistic skill and the body that has called the attention of some feminist scholars. This is one of the premises of the cornerstone of poststructuralist feminist studies: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) in which Judith Butler examines queer theories and language in the light of the physical attributes ascribed to the genders and how our exterior (body) shapes our subjectivity (our language and our perception of ourselves). In her study she draws on the French feminists (mainly Kristeva) and her revolutionary notions about the speaking subject as an outcome of the negotiation of one's own perception, the perception that others have about us and the language used to mediate those identity transactions. Butler resumes Kristeva's understanding of language as a derivate of the "materiality of bodily life (…) a primary act of displacement and condensation" (Butler 69).

In line with those theories of the speaking subject, its bodily materiality and its need to verbalize their 'process of becoming,' we come across two distinct sides of language: the symbolic and the semiotic. These take the form of the phenotext and the genotext, respectively, a differentiation which is made most evident in the case of poetic language, as Kristeva argues (92-93). Thus, we distinguish between the form of a linguistic manifestation (e.g., a written poem) and the encoding and decoding processes performed by authors and readers; form and matter. It is strictly in poetry where language's two sides (the form or phenotext, and the internal processes at stake or genotext) take shape. In bringing up this distinction in poetic language, we note that Edna St. Vincent Millay played a most arresting game. The external form of some of her poems bears the history of poetry in them (e.g., the ballad form in "The Ballad of the Harp Weaver" and the Romantic borrowing of the sonnet with its complicate metrics) while their content is stunningly childish at first sight. But let us explore this paradox from the lens of the physical body of a poem (what Kristeva called the 'symbolic') and the processes associated to it (the 'semiotic'):

> What we shall call a genotext will include semiotic underlying foundation. We shall use the term *phenotext* to denote language that serves to communicate, which linguistics describes in terms of "competence" and "performance." The phenotext is constantly split up and divided, and is irreducible to the semiotic process that works through the genotext. The phenotext is a structure (…); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee. The genotext, on the other hand, is a process; it moves through zones that have relative and transitory borders and constitutes a *path* that is not restricted to the two poles of univocal information between two full-fledged subjects. If these two terms – genotext and phenotext – could be translated into a metalanguage that would convey the difference between them, one might say that the genotext is a matter of topology, whereas the phenotext is one of algebra. (Italics in the original; Kristeva 87)

Since Kristeva identifies the visible aspect of poetic communication as the poem there is so much in Millay left for readers to fill; that is to say, the words in her poems always imply much more than they say. This poet plays language's game but she plays it with her own rules. Already in her first collection of poems, the delicate grief of the speaker in "Kin to Sorrow" makes readers pose their curious

eyes in its lines. Just sixteen lines that employ a self-reflective mechanism where the narrator wonders: "Am I kin to Sorrow, / That so oft / Falls the knocker of my door – " (ll. 1-3). As a victim of her pain, the narrator invokes natural imagery in the manner of Emily Dickinson in stating: "And what does Sorrow care / For the rosemary / Or the marigolds there?" (ll. 10-12). The form of the poem is akin to a poetic cry yet it has a colloquial tone in spite of the depth of its theme. The end of this poem offers the striking resolution, interrupted by the embodiment of Sorrow: "Am I kin to Sorrow? / Are we kin? / That so oft upon my door— / *Oh, come in*!" (ll. 13-16).

The very scene that Millay depicts in the previous lines is abruptly interrupted by this not-so-unexpected arrival at her door. The symbolic order in this poem is the written language that is in close contact with the semiotic, the genotext, since it gives the impression that the author's written text has been cut short in the middle of the creative process (of the encoding process of the genotext). Hence, one is misguided into thinking that there is more in this poem which has been omitted. This is just one of the instances of the use of the semiotic in poetic language: modelling the streams of meaning, playing with the readers' expectations and, in her case, very often with the socially accepted norms, too. Her intention is to disrupt and reshape the symbolic, to give it a new, more open dimension. "Kin to Sorrow" is an instance of a lament where the speaking subject's lyrical stream of consciousness is disrupted, silenced in the presence of that which has caused the narrator's pain in the first place. Millay voluntarily silences many things in her poems in a more overt manner (as in the poem just mentioned) or in a more subtle manner. The latter case is illustrated by "Witch-Wife," a perennial song to the self where that which constitutes the core of the poem is just that which is silenced. In the scenario where the phenotext is incomplete (or intentionally veiled) readers are compelled to reach the meaning behind it, the genotext hidden under inexistent lines in a poem.

From the perspective of readers, "Witch-Wife" puts at work our poetic skills to understand some lines such as: "She is neither pink nor pale" (l. 1) from each one's genotextual poetic toolkit. In order to engage readers into her poems she defines her witch-wife in negative terms by saying that which she is not. Yet, this is what Millay intended her readers to do, to choose their own poetic interpretation: this woman is neither alive (pink) nor dead (pale), or maybe she is neither a lustful woman (pink) nor a prude (pale). The phenotext is not clear about the manner of reading these lines and Millay could note care less about imbuing explicit meaning into her poetry, which she avoided by turning instead to vivid metaphors, fantastic imagery and musical resources to deceive readers into thinking that they will find absolute meaning in her poems. Readers receive only the phenotext in Millay's poetry, and this is not even complete or explicit (as shown before). The genotext runs wild in an invisible torrent of semiotic chains, merging and expelling connotative allusions to every written word in this poem: is this poem reminiscent of the witches that fantastic literature has pictured as voluptuous vampires that the Romantic tradition restored to the imaginary?

The former are indeed only some of the possible readings that we can ascribe to this poem. However, all the signs that make it up contribute to the mystery of this woman and her equally unknown observer. Words and silences operate in this piece of literature veiling and unveiling a bewitching woman whose deceptive

passivity is symbolized by her voice, which is: "a string of colored beads / Or steps leading into the sea" (ll. 7-8). What is remarkable is the simplicity of the language (its symbolic manifestation) and the many interpretations it can have (the semiotic side): the sea may be the space that swallows life as in certain novels such as Chopin's *The Awakening* [1] or an attempt to emulate the magnificence and immensity of this element. The previous lines account for Millay's understanding of the text as an open-ended process of significations and resignifications, a vessel or recipient of different interpretations. The different forms of interconnection between the form and the processes of creation and understanding of a work of literature are at the origin of the difference between discourses:

> These two modalities [the semiotic and the symbolic] are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called "natural" language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But (...) this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (Italics in the original; Kristeva 24)

For her notions of semiotic and symbolic order, Kristeva draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis and frames her theory "within the constraints of a practice – the *text* – is only of secondary interest to psychoanalysis" (italics in the original; Kristeva 24); that is, she focuses on the text as the artistic outcome of the speaking subject's process of becoming. In this manner, the poems are studied as the resulting artifacts of the subject's poetic energy, the embodiment of the desires and restraints of an author. The process of interpreting a poem is as open as the linguistic signs that form it, so that a word can establish semantic and phonetic chains with other words (intra-textual semioses) and with external objects (extra-textual semioses). This is the basis of the poetic language, as the elusive witch-wife in the preceding poem exemplifies. The next section explores the connection between women and nature (especially with the motif of the witch) in line with Estés' feminist approach to folktales and Western cultures. The comparison between the witch in this poem and the lady in the woods in Millay's poem: "The Singing-Woman from the Wood's Edge" sheds contemporary light on the two sides of the continuum of femininity: the witch and the fairy.

4. Women in nature; the nature of women

Women have been traditionally connected with the cyclical stages of birth and re-birth of nature in view of their condition as 'givers of life,' a thesis followed by

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[1] As Viola Parente-Čapková states in her essay: "Narcissuses, Medusas, Ophelias… Water Imagery and Femininity in the Texts by Two Decadent Women Writers": "Water has been traditionally connected with life, birth and re-birth, creation and creativity, but also with death and oblivion" (189).

some ecofeminist scholars who draw on the basis of the exploitation of the female body as a machine at the service of the male power (such as Karen J. Warren). Some studies about the link between women and nature have followed the spiritualist, essentialist line of research finding tight bonds between the imaginary of the female and that of nature. Literature has certainly fed on this connection deepening on the topic of nature and its elements and how they relate to or act upon women. Often, this has led to a comparison of women to witches, dangerous and evil inhabitants of dark woods at some points in history – such as in the Salem Witch Trials of the late seventeenth century in Massachusetts. For happenings as sad and uninformed as these have women found in nature sometimes a safe shelter from socio-patriarchal constraints and, other times, a safe gateway for self-expression and freedom. In any case, the connection between women and nature has also been examined from a spiritual stance. This is the case of the American writer and Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who published in 1992 her book: *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. This volume is her most relevant contribution to the study of the feminist psyche and it lies in her study of folklore literature. The stories she discusses aim at showing how a feminist reading of the symbolic order – traditional tales and stories – can reshape women's role in society if we only change the semiotic order – the approach to the underlying meaning in these narratives.

In her book, Estés presents folktales where women have been either disregarded as secondary characters or interpreted under the male-dominated theories which demonized them or else underestimated their value in narratives such as: "La Loba," "Bluebeard" or "The Handless Maiden." Millay was fascinated by folktales and she showed it by introducing magical, spiritual and imaginary intertextual references in her poems. In her poem: "Doubt no More that Oberon" Millay calls for a new reading of Shakespeare's most famous comedy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) in a setting that evokes the carefree and merry tone of the Bard's play. Even in the plays she wrote, Millay demonstrates an enormous interest in classical folklore often incorporating sexual innuendos such as in *The Princess Marries the Page. A Play in One Act* (1917), a play in verse she wrote as an undergraduate student at Vassar College. As Thomas Fahy declares in his book: *Staging Modern American Life: Popular Culture in the Experimental Theatre of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos*: "this fairy tale incorporates numerous elements from conventional tales, such as the courtly setting, a long-haired princess in a tower, a page who turns out to be a prince, an apple, a dark forest, and talk of fairies" (n/p). But, contrary to what this Disney-like scenario may seem, Millay was far from the idea of presenting her princess as a damsel in distress. Instead, "Millay's fairytale [displays] a modern sensibility, casting women as independent, assertive, and creative but also her [the princess'] hunger presents sexual desire in women as natural, as something that should be expressed without embarrassment" (Fahy n/p).

Millay subverts traditional female roles and gives them an entirely new dimension making readers question the value of the oral and written narratives we have received as life lessons without questioning them. Such is the case of "Witch-Wife" where the danger of this wife stems from the fact that she has certain sensuous or sexual features that make her fit into the idea of what a witch

is, according to the cultural imaginary. But Estés invites readers to reconsider why witches have long raised feelings of fear and attraction especially to men. According to her,

> Like the word wild, the word witch has come to be understood as a pejorative, but long ago it was an appellation given to both old and young women healers (…). This was before cultures carrying the one-God-only religious image began to overwhelm the older pantheistic cultures which understood the Deity through multiple religious images of the universe and all its phenomena. But regardless, the ogress, the witch, the wild nature, and whatever other creatures and integral aspects the culture finds awful in the psyches of women are the very blessed things which women often need most to retrieve and bring to the surface. (68)

Estés makes a call for women to bring to life their lost bond with that which is not imposed on them by society, to retrieve the natural in them and, in this way, to come to terms with the witch and wilderness. We understand the symbolic order of language as the acoustic or written signs 'witch' or 'wild,' and the semiotic order as the meaning they evoke in us. What we come across now is a vindication of the dynamic essence of the feminine by allowing new associations of these concepts – yet not only new ones, as the historical meaning of 'witch' implies – to mingle, adapt and renovate our poetic imaginary.

"The Singing-Woman" features a landscape that posits a subject in a threshold but let us focus now on the role of the forest. Estés finds that in entering the forest, a woman initiates a journey, thus presenting this step as an initiatory journey (64). This scholar claims that the forest shows a psychoanalytic side whereby women who enter into it often undergo an individual process of introspection so that in "consenting to venture into the locus of deep initiation (entering the forest), and beginning to experience the new and dangerous-feeling numen of being in one's intuitive power [women learn] to develop sensitivity as regards direction to the mysterious unconscious and relying solely on one's inner senses" (64). And she states that the capability we have as humans to feel that we are alive is most connected with our physical ability to sense that we are trespassing any limit: "without body there would be no sensations of crossing thresholds (…). The body is the rocket launcher. In its nose capsule, the soul looks out the window into the mysterious starry night and is dazzled" (151).

Hence, although we certainly need the invisible organic flow of (semiotic) meaning in our everyday lives we still need a material basis, which in poetry translates as the written word, with the aim of building the majestic poems that have resonated throughout history. Both are interdependent and yet, both are in constant process of change. Estés – and Millay for her part – shows that this mutability is not unique to the semiotic (typically linked to the feminine) but that it must also exist in the symbolic (the body and the specific literary manifestation of the poem). This theory connects again with Butler's queer theory when she compares the female body to artistic expression (language) (Butler 98). Women's work of art and her body are thus artifacts on which they act upon and which they use to express their identity and their place in the world. The witch-wife from Millay's poem is wise, that is clear, since she is free and she is well aware of this fact, which stimulates her attractiveness in her lovers' eyes and her value as a woman. But it is equally powerful the seemingly naïve "fiend's god-daughter" that

we encounter in "The Singing-Woman." The narrator warns readers from the beginning about her awkward personality arguing that: "there comes to birth no common spawn / From the love of a priest for a leprechaun" (ll. 13-14) so that she is unique because she was born like this. Let us turn now to the apparently less dangerous (from a male's perspective) female stereotype, though still tied to nature: the fairy.

In "The Singing-Woman" the narrator compares her mother-daughter love relationship to that of a "pixie-mother (...) for her baby" (l. 10) after calling her mother a leprechaun (ll. 2, 14). Estés identifies a rapport between fairies in folk narratives to wisdom and argues further that the apparently naïve beings – she puts the example of the doll – are, in fact, those that represent deepest female wisdom: "the doll is related to the symbols of leprechaun, elf, pixie, fairy, and dwarf. In fairy tales these represent a deep throb of wisdom within the culture of the psyche. They are those creatures which go on with the canny and interior work, who are tireless" (65). This poem presents a milder vision of women, less sensually aggressive as the witch in "Witch-Wife" and yet, they are identically free, independent and they keep a bond with the realm of the spirit, the soul that, as Estés laments, women have lost in favor of a moral of materiality (65). This doll, fairy or leprechaun exists in all women in the forms of their "inner reason, inner knowing, and inner consciousness" (65). This is the lost bond that the female heroines and narrators in Millay have discovered and thanks to it, they can wander freely on the wood's edge and rejoice their 'witchery.' These varying interpretations of "Witch-Wife" are further developed by the graphic creator Julian Peters in his contemporary, comic reading of this poem analyzed in the section presented hereafter.

5. Intermedial "Witch-Wife": showing the unsaid

For the semiotic study of female representations in Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Witch-Wife" this article uses some works of intermediality. Will Eisner's book: *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) where this scholar stresses comics' ergodicity because "[t]he format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills" (8). This American writer emphasizes the "focus" in his panels, which is of great help in exploring the female protagonist's identity in the poem: "Witch-Wife." Scott McCloud wrote in 1993 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* building on Eisner's study. In this book McCloud legitimizes comics in their role of art vehicles. One of Scott McCloud's most interesting contribution is the graphic representation of time in comics. Together with Will Eisner and Scott McCloud it is worth mentioning Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who published *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. This book was an inspirational and useful manual for the interpretation and analysis of images from the point of view of semiotics of multimodality in communication studies.

In the graphic adaptation of "Witch-Wife" designed by Julian Peters readers first come across an initial panel where the very images of the double-ended candles frame the title of this poem. This is a clear intertextual and intermedial reference to Millay's rebellious poem "First Fig," which starts: "My candle burns

at both ends" (l. 1). Beside this remark, the font of the title in Peters' adaptation tries to imitate the gothic style that would make readers think of this woman as a witch, as Millay indicates, being this visual resource enhanced by the image of the female lips drawn just under the title (see Figure 1 below). Kress and van Leeuwen identified the interactive metafunction, that is, visual contact from the observer toward the images, together with social distance. Peters' graphic adaptation of Millay's poem has no panels where the character's gaze is directed to viewers, indicating closeness among the characters so that readers are mere viewers, observers of the woman. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, gaze enables engagement between the work of art and the viewer (117), an involvement that owes to the readers' imagination as for traditional literature (Hutcheon 23) and to different perception mechanisms regarding the visual mode.

Fig. 1. "Witch-Wife."

Fig. 2. "Witch-Wife."

The frame size of the panels speaks of the with the woman and her suitors. The majority of close-ups represent the woman in different forms (such a rose, and a weaver taken from a fairytale) (see the bottom panels in Figure 1) and the medium-shots and long-shots are more often used to represent the woman that is the object of male desire in company of her male suitors as depicted in the middle panels in Figure 1 and the fourth panel in Figure 2 above. This change in the distance of the woman with the readers/observers makes sense if we consider the fact that she seems to be perceived paradoxically from the outside, which in fact, bears a more insightful knowledge of the witch-wife than it seems.

Kress and van Leeuwen identified some principles of composition that they apply to multimodal texts. These principles are: framing, salience and information value (177). The information value of the human figures on the left-

hand panel just under the title panel in Figure 1 shows us the perspective of the narrator (corresponding to the male speaking voice). The man is placed on the right of the panel next to the woman (who is clearly drawn as Millay herself), a space in the panel devoted to the new information (Kress and van Leeuwen 197). The lady, for her part, is depicted as a dangerously bewitching temptress for whom the man is her prey on the left hand of the image. Yet, as the story advances, the next panel shows the woman in the right middle of the panel, with one man at each side, depicting the woman in the center of the image, a part which receives the focus of attention in visual and poetic terms, as Kress and van Leeuwen agree (197).

Regarding salience, it is worth noting that certain aspects of an image are perceived before others due to: "the appearance of a human figure or a potent cultural symbol" (Kress and van Leeuwen 202), among other factors. The woman in the comic shows a somehow unique physical appearance that evokes some kind of danger for her lover, a woman who presents some features that recall the stereotype of the *femme fatale*. Regarding framing, we can see that the majority of the panels in the comic have frames around them. Julian Peters version of this poem uses this device a lot in his work, which helps to understand why no frames in the visual language of images accounts for a sense of group identity, as Kress and van Leeuwen put it (203). This in turn provide another interpretation of Edna St. Vincent Millay's perception of her female personas in her poetry: her intention was to express her own feelings and thoughts. Only in very few cases in the comic are the panels depicted as loose images on the page, without a frame. This indicates that the time when the poem is taking place is not bound to any specific moment in history, but rather, that it is not limited to one temporal framework, more often showing the lady in them (see first panel in Fig. 2 and the fourth panel in Fig. 2, where she also appears with her male companion on a car).

Time in this poem is frozen from the very first line by making use of the present tense, the unnamed narrator is endowing his witch-wife with a realm that makes her eternal, unbound by world constraints. Peters' comic shows this stillness in the temporal flow in the form of visibly separated panels with large gutters and loose captions between them thus producing a sequence of frozen moments or moments to which time limits do not apply (McCloud 101). Though timeless, the woman in this poem is not static; it is precisely because she survives time that she is a dynamic subject who is: "polyvalent, polylogical, plural, unfixed" (Robbins 127). The resulting feeling is that the woman depicted by Millay is immortal, in line with witches' capacity for magical tricks beyond human laws, as figured by the imaginary. Millay is also playing with time when she has her narrator moan: "she never will be all mine" (l. 12), thus extending the time limits beyond human reach as if he could plunge into the future and see his misery living away from his beloved one. For that reason, this artist makes the panel frames that present the woman's attributes within rectangular lines that are also straight, avoiding the curved edges used to represent a time that has passed, as the scholar McCloud notes (44).

The protagonist's voice in "Witch-Wife" is mediated by that of the narrator. Although readers may have the feeling that there is more than the narrator tells about her (as it is): at no point in the poem do we hear the woman's voice and, consequently, there is no speech balloon allotted for her where she can provide

her own perspective and justification for her deeds. The woman here is the center of male attention on the part of the speaker and, nonetheless, she is not given a voice by the author. This stands as one more apparently paradoxical poetic device whereby Millay presents her heroine in a game of inner-outer mirrors contrasting what men see in her and what readers have to figure she would say about her and them. It is made visible in the comic adaptation, where, although subtle, there is no image depicting Millay opening her mouth (literally as well as metaphorically).

The author behind the male narrator, counteracts, somehow, the absence of a voice of this woman's own. This has to say Kristeva as regards the ostensible inactivity of a subject by turning his or her actions into his or her new way of self-expression:

> In calling the text a practice we must not forget that it is a new practice, radically different from the mechanistic practice of a null and void, atomistic subject who refuses to acknowledge that he is a subject of language. Against such a "practice," the text as signifying practice points toward the possibility – which is a jouissance – of a *subject who speaks his being put in process/on trial through action*. In other words and conversely, the text restores to "mute" practice the jouissance that constitutes it but which can only become jouissance through language. (Italics in the original; *Revolution in Poetic Language* 210)

It is a major evidence that, in this poem, Millay is on the woman's side, who, although deprived of a voice of her own, counts on Millay's because this 'evil' woman-temptress enacts Millay's own poetic self. The symbolic in this poem (i.e., the form it takes with an apparent invisibility of this woman) and the semiotic (unsaid) language in it invite Millay's readers to revisit her poetry in line of the author's male and female characters and the issue of perspective in them.

6. Conclusion

This research has explored the speaking subject in Millay's poetry as regards the portrayal of women in her poem: "Witch-Wife," its connection with Kristeva's *chora* and semiotic space, the role of women in nature connected with the image of the fairy and a modern transposition of "Witch-Wife" to the graphic format. The constant flow of inferences at stake in this poem come hand in hand with the image that Millay wanted to show publicly. This is an image of strength in any and every circumstance and of self-control. A feeling that is what ultimately brings her to admit that she is her own master, no one else can tell her what to do or even what she is. She knows that the path to self-discovery and a better understanding of herself cannot be attained but with an introspective voyage into herself. The willingly playful (little explicit) overtone of "Witch-Wife" indicates that the poet is indeed in full mastery of her creative genius and her sense of 'I.' The organic and mutable chains of signification and resignification in this poem point at the sigs within and outside it, too, to the life of their author and her time.

The natural setting in the poem "The Singing-Woman," as Estés' study has demonstrated, provides the perfect framework for the discovery of woman's internal eye in the form of a spiritual quest of her sense of 'I.' Although the imaginary beings in this poem show an innocent side of her life as a child, the animals from the real world indicate that life is also dangerous (e.g., the adder,

the frog). They are normally connected in the popular imaginary to witches and this, in turn takes us back to the previous poem. Interpreted from Millay's poetics, women are never presented as secondary characters (not even when, as in "Witch-Wife," they do not have a voice). Nature works here as the symbolic externalization of her narrator's semiotic flow of signs in the form of memories, cross-cultural elements and biographical references. Thus, the subject in this poem can be interpreted as the infant version of the witch-woman in the homonymous piece, in the form of a novelistic prequel to the present life of this woman. We could hence draw a fine line that runs from the child in "The Singing-Woman" (who actually sings her woes to her fellow creatures in the wood) to the determined, free 'witch' in the second poem, represented by Millay herself.

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