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The Postmodern and the Personal in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s Aria Da Capo

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At the peak of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s popularity, she represented the quintessential New Woman: she bobbed her hair, she learned how to drive, and she was incredibly independent. She was also admired for her passionate and personal poetry. After that initial fervor, however, the New Critics dismissed her writings as simple and sentimental and excluded her from modernist canon (Walker 171). Since then, the critics of the past have been outpaced and Millay has recently enjoyed a resurgence of critical acclaim, especially in feminist studies. Scholars today place Millay firmly in conversation with larger political and cultural schema and attempt to reconcile her sentimentality with the modernist conventions that were prevalent in the early 1900s (Walker 172). The majority of academic discourse has focused on Millay’s poetry; this, of course, is expected as Millay was first and foremost a poet. However, because of this widespread focus on her poetry, almost entirely absent from this academic discourse is a critical conversation surrounding Millay’s 1919 play *Aria Da Capo*.

In what little academic writing about *Aria Da Capo* exists, there seems to be some confusion about what the purpose and impact of the play actually are. This play, a three-part, self-reflective farce turned social commentary turned tragedy, opens on an opulent feast shared between two Harlequinade characters, but is soon taken over by an authoritative director figure as he forces two other actors to perform a double murder, Greek tragedy style. The play ends as the bodies are hidden from the house, and the Harlequinade begins again, exactly as before. Due
to this strange combination of genres, characters, recombination, and recontextualization, critics often have difficulty finding the perfect place for *Aria Da Capo* to fit. Barbara Ozieblo sits firmly in the belief that the play is both modernist and avant-garde while Thomas Fahy argues instead that it is a social commentary piece that works directly against those ideals. My essay builds upon Suzanne Clark’s argument that Millay works within known traditional forms to “challenge the hierarchies of modernism” (Freedman and Clark 9). My thesis extends this claim past modernism and into genre in general. In *Aria Da Capo*, Millay works within known theatrical traditions and deploys contemporaneously popular modernist techniques to both subvert modernist practices at the height of their popularity as well as illuminate how prescriptive genre rules have damaged society’s relationship to art and stunted artists’ ability to make meaningful work. This essay, through an exploration of Millay’s uneasy critical success followed by a close reading of *Aria Da Capo* uncovers Millay’s anticipatory postmodernist leanings. According to Millay, an adequate objective portrayal of reality can never truly exist; and yet, she recognizes that artists, herself included, will continue to attempt this impossible task regardless of how unachievable it may be. Millay holds subjective truth and artistic freedom above all else; this allows *Aria Da Capo* to continue to be invaluable to artists today as they traverse the artistic fatigue that has become prevalent after the loss of objective truth.

Although today Edna St. Vincent Millay may not be as immediately recognizable as poets such as Gertrude Stein or Robert Frost, she is still widely considered one of the most influential poets of the early 20th century. From her first notable publishing success, her poem “Renascence” in *The Lyric Year* when she was only 19, Millay captured the attention of critics and audiences alike (Parker 381). As her success grew, so too did her notability, and her passionate writing style moved even the most taciturn critics to adoration (Gargaillo 69). This
success soon catapulted Millay’s career and in 1923, Millay became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize (“Edna St. Vincent Millay”). Millay’s public readings were well attended, and this had as much to do with her performance of the poems as it did with the words themselves. Indeed, she cut a striking figure with her bobbed red hair and petite frame, and she would often wear elaborate and beautiful dresses to accompany her dramatic readings (“Edna St. Vincent Millay”). The author even “kept up with the most current dances, and learned to drive in 1920” (Fahy 2). Millay’s image and rumors of her free-spirited personality thus became widely circulated and she was soon adopted as the foremost icon of the New Woman. These early years of Millay’s career seemed to guarantee the poet’s success as she established her voice in representing her contemporary time in both her poetry and her actions. Millay, at her peak, was not only an icon of her time, but a symbol of it, as well.

It is no surprise, then, that Millay scholars now recontextualize her poetry in the milieu of the modernist movement; although, her text that is perhaps most representative of this period is Aria Da Capo rather than any of her poetic works. The modernist movement began during a time of unrestrained cultural upheaval. Artists, attempting to make sense of the horrors of war and trying to reconceptualize what place art had in society, reinvented the poem, the painting, the novel, and more. In Aria Da Capo, we see the attempt for reconciliation with World War I in the Greek tragedy that inhabits the middle section of the play. As the greed and senseless violence of the two man war ends in a double murder, the audience is left astounded and grieving; Millay’s critique on war is clear in this scene. Barbara Ozieblo then claims that “Aria Da Capo can only be considered a modernist play” due to Millay’s masterful use of fragmentation and combination (Ozieblo 15). Aria is thus a perfect representation of the post-war, modernist movement in America. Due to this perfect fit, the play “was revived many times,” and was apparently, the
“best play of the 1919-1920 season” (Ozieblo 12). Aria Da Capo thus expanded Millay’s literary identity and extended her popularity to the realm of theater. Why this play has been largely absent from scholarly conversation is therefore even more puzzling; the following history of Millay’s critical success (and decline) will shed light on this transgression.

The nationwide infatuation with Millay would not last, and as literary criticism evolved, the attitudes surrounding Millay’s poetry eventually cooled. Florian Gargaillo places Millay’s turn in fortune within the midst of the New Critic movement beginning in the 1930s. Gargaillo claims that “for the New Critics, Millay’s poetry was too passionate and lacked the balance of a cooler mind” (70). No longer was Millay’s charming, girlish, radical persona tolerated and both her image and her writing changed due to the growing disdain for her romantic poetry. By the release of her 1937 book, Conversations at Midnight, she seemed to be a different writer altogether. Peter Monro Jack observes this shift in his New York Times article of the same year; his review both condemns Millay’s previous “naively philosophical” and “philosophically naive” romantic poems and praises her newfound modesty and intelligence that places it “easily and well in the logic of contemporary poetry” (Jack 75). This review thus marked a shift in the expectations of literary works, one that no longer allowed the poet the carefree inhibition that was characteristic of her earlier texts. Much of Millay’s work was therefore branded as unimportant and not worth scholarly attention.

As the New Critic movement progressed and the United States moved steadily closer to engaging in the second World War, Millay continued expanding her rhetorical tool belt (both in the style of her writing and in the genre of projects she took on) in an attempt to stay relevant. These efforts would amount to little success as compared to her early career, and by the release of her 1943 dramatic radio play, The Murder of Lidice—which John K. Hutchens describes as
“Not a great poem, not her best poem, but one which finely serves the time, the medium and the intention” (X12)–Millay had fallen out of favor with both critics and audiences. By the end of her life, Millay’s period of critical acclaim had passed, as is evident by her obituary in The Times which states that,

Admirers of Edna Millay would scarcely claim for her a place among the major poets of America. She fails, it has been suggested, to touch positive greatness owing to her lack of that final austerity of thought and feeling which sets great poets apart. Her best work, however, will undoubtedly give her high rank among American poets of secondary grade ("Miss E. St. Vincent Millay").

Condemned to be a perfectly average poet, Millay’s historical relevance seemed all but lost.

It was not until the advent of New Historicism and, more importantly, Second Wave Feminism, that Millay’s work was reanalyzed. The most notable development of this wave of critique–the 1992 “Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal” conference and subsequent book–showcased events and essays analyzing Millay and her works specifically in context with the modernist movement and First Wave Feminism. For the first time, even including Millay’s original success during her lifetime, her work was analyzed both for the inherent value within the texts themselves and in the context of the larger cultural milieu (Freedman, et al.). These scholars pay particular and careful attention to not only “Millay's poetry but also to her verse drama, private letters, novel, and ‘potboiler’ magazine fiction” (Freedman xiv), proving just how far reaching Millay’s literary expertise was.

Each of these essays (and others analyzing Millay’s works), although poignant and expansive, inspect only small portions of her textual canon at one time and more work can be done to contextualize Millay’s works and her conflicted experiences with authorship and
criticism. I would not suggest that scholars attempt the massive, and impossible, work of contextualizing every single text of Edna St. Vincent Millay. However, I will suggest that the connection between the many masks that Millay wears as an author have not been adequately evaluated in relation to each other. Such an analysis creates context in which *Aria Da Capo* can exist, not only as an anti-war allegory, but rather as an important critical work just as the rest of Millay’s texts have proven to be. As many feminist theorists have claimed, Millay was radical in her expression of femininity and womanhood, but this rebellious nature extended beyond just these categories. Millay strained against expectations of all kinds throughout her career, whether they appear in single lines of her poems or in the different literary personas she adopted. As an author, Millay was always reaching beyond the limitations of genre; what follows is a brief exploration of previous critical essays to exemplify this claim followed by an in depth analysis of *Aria Da Capo* in the context of the current scholarship surrounding Millay.

Florian Gargaillo, with her essay “The Divided Selves of St Vincent Millay,” expertly delves into line by line analysis of Millay’s poetry to uncover her strained relationship with genre in the smallest parts of her writing. Gargaillo traces a similar history of Millay’s critical acclaim as what has been included here. She then expresses her doubt as to if either the New Critics or the more recent Feminist scholars have adequately surmised the true purpose of Millay’s sentimentality (71). To the New Critics, Millay was too reliant on cliche and theatrical passion (70). The Feminist theorist, on the other hand, posited Millay’s poetry to be “ironic mimicry designed to expose the artifice of poetic and social conventions, particularly surrounding gender” (69). Gargaillo argues that neither of these readings adequately “accounts for her popularity while also honoring the complexities of her writing” (69). Gargaillo then analyzes a number of Millay’s poems to illuminate how Millay is critical of both sentimentality
and logical reasoning. According to Gargaillo, Millay does this “careful footwork” to “[establish] a distinctive relation between reader and speaker,” and in doing so, “Millay encourages readers to sympathize with her lyric speakers on the grounds that their dilemma—the tension between thought and feeling—is intimately familiar” (79). I would argue that Millay does not create this tension just for the benefit of relating to her readers. As Gargaillo exemplifies, Millay masterfully crafts her sonnets using both sentimental or romantic conventions as well as those present in texts whose foundations are logic and rationality. These seemingly contradictory genres therefore exist in single poems, and sometimes in single poetic lines (Gargaillo 79). This ambivalence prevents her work from being neatly defined or categorized and so in need of constant reevaluation by readers and critics. The attempt to place Millay into one group, however, is a mistake as it ignores the complex interweaving of genre conventions that Millay enacts. This refusal to be defined must be intentional. Millay is unwilling to be limited by one prescribed set of rules and so chooses to subvert them at every opportunity; we will see much of the same in Aria Da Capo.

A closer look at Millay’s multiple literary pursuits will expose how she, even in her literary identity, strained against categorization. Millay’s most notable undertaking of this nature was that of her pen name Nancy Boyd. Under this false name, Millay wrote what Deborah Woodard calls “potboilers:” witty and satirical fictions that reflect the attitude and gossip of the 1920s, especially surrounding Greenwich Village. Norman A. Brittin defines three themes which are “paramount in [these stories]: the question of love versus career, the approval of Greenwich Village attitudes, and the overwhelming of men by love” (Brittin 31). Few critics disagree with the fact that Nancy Boyd was created to provide a more steady income for Millay than poetry allowed (Freedman and Woodard 145). Woodard, unsatisfied with just this reason, claims that
“Through Boyd, Millay could foreground the construction of woman and woman artist in ways that reflect back upon her own precarious positioning as ‘representative’ woman poet . . . Nancy Boyd functioned both as an outlet for ‘improper’ musings and as a foil against their getting too far out of hand” (Freedman and Woodard 146). In other words, Nancy Boyd allowed Millay to express opinions that would be inappropriate for her as a well known literary figure (even one as radical as she) to express under her own name. Additionally, Millay was not constricted with the form of the sonnet. Although most of her Nancy Boyd fictions still had a form in that they were written in the style of popular magazine fictions of the time or as satirical sketches or playlets, the looser nature of prose allowed Millay to explore other avenues of creation that were not confined to her image as the 20th century poetess. Millay, although a masterful poet, could develop and surpass the themes of her poetry with these fictions, allowing her to grow beyond genre in a way that the confines of the sonnet did not.

Apart from her excursions as Nancy Boyd, Millay expanded her literary voice by producing other works under her own name as well. Beyond the lyric poetry for which she is most well known, Millay produced multiple dramatic works, a libretto, a novel, a radio play, and contributed to multiple journals and magazines (“Edna St. Vincent Millay”). It may not be particularly odd that a professional writer produced so many different types of works; however, if Millay determined the sonnet to be restrictive for her purposes, she certainly felt that the conventions of any genre would not allow her to realize her fullest potential as an author. If even her poetry has never been adequately analyzed, as Florian Gargiallo claims, then the rest of her material must be in a similar position. Although the New Critics certainly misread the intentions of her works, no group of scholars, even Second Wave Feminists, have allowed Millay’s texts to exist as she intended them to. Academic scholarship and criticism, out of necessity, defines
artists and tries to solve the problems introduced in their works by securing the text in literary, social, political, religious (the list goes on) movements. The interpretive work of scholars directly opposes Millay’s own creative instinct. She, through her writing and her public image, used all available avenues to prevent the constrictions and expectations of the same genres and movements that scholars today attempt to place her texts inside. *Aria Da Capo* has naturally not escaped this misdeed, and it is Millay’s most pointed commentary addressing this unequal relationship between critic, genre, and artist.

Even with the massive amount of recontextualizing that Millay scholars have performed in more recent years, *Aria Da Capo* is still strangely and noticeably absent from the conversation; this void exists for multiple reasons. First, and most glaringly, *Aria Da Capo* is not an overtly feminist play. Columbine, the only female character, is, according to Millay’s character notes “Pretty and charming, but stupid” (Millay). She has no opportunity in the play to subvert patriarchal society and her role is not developed beyond the stock vapid female character that she is meant to be. As the vast majority of Millay scholars write exclusively in feminist theory, this play is not a candidate for debate, and indeed, feminist commentary is not really the point of the play. Secondly, *Aria Da Capo* is taken for granted as a simple text. The play itself may seem complicated due to its self-reflexivity and cast of characters that span historical time periods; but, at its core, at least according to the majority of critics, “its story is essentially a simple one” (Page C18). The basic anti-war allegory is taken at face value and few audience members, reviewers, or scholars see much use in analyzing the work further. Thirdly, *Aria Da Capo* is simultaneously considered too much “of its time” as well as too generic to be historically relevant. Barbara Ozieblo’s assertion that it “can only be considered a modernist play” (15) is echoed in the brief mentions of the play that exist throughout Millay scholarship. Many of the
rhetorical moves that Millay employs, the stock characters she uses, and the social commentary that she makes are indicative of the modernist period of the 1920s. These elements make it seem as though the text cannot be analyzed outside of the modernist context. On the other hand, unlike *The Murder of Lidice*, which is explicitly about World War II, none of the action of *Aria Da Capo* is truly reliant on any specific time period. The play is written such that directors may freely choose to set the action in any time period that they would like. The ambivalence that exists in this text may seem both outdated and yet somehow timeless, or rather disconnected from time at all, making both historical analysis and transhistorical analysis difficult.

Nonetheless, difficulty is no reason to ignore a lapse in scholarship if one exists. This essay thus cultivates the varied readings of Millay’s works and applies them to *Aria Da Capo* so as to fill the void that exists in this author’s long and robust career.

*Aria Da Capo*, while it can be read as an anti-war allegory, is more fully understood if each scene is analyzed individually as well as in context; a brief summary of the action of the play will therefore be helpful in understanding the complexity of such a task. *Aria Da Capo* is a three part, self-reflexive, and self-repeating play in which a Harlequinade feast is interrupted by a tragic Greek pastoral, after which the Harlequinade begins again from the beginning. The commedia dell’arte characters Pierrot, the sardonic poet type, and Columbine, the spacey and beautiful love interest, enjoy an excessive feast that is soon interrupted by Cothurnus, the controlling director figure, who demands the stage in order for his actors to perform a Greek pastoral. Thyrsis and Corydon, the two young shepherds from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, enter the stage as friends but are soon overcome by greed and hatred, eventually murdering each other. Pierrot and Columbine, returning to stage once more, are prompted by Cothurnus to hide the bodies from the house and begin the Harlequinade from the beginning. The curtain closes as Pierrot and
Columbine begin the play exactly as before. From this brief recount, the social commentary and pacifist leanings of the play may be obvious. Thomas Fahy characterizes these aspects of the play, claiming: “the play presents two overlapping dramas about escapism and violence;” that is, *Aria Da Capo* warns the audience about the downfalls of an excessive, escapist society as well as the horrors of greed and violence that may lead to war (Fahy 1). This is an adequate surface reading of the action of the play; but, the layers of this text are many and must be analyzed individually in order to adequately uncover Millay’s true purpose in writing the text.

*Aria Da Capo* has thus far been unquestioningly accepted as modernist; however, exactly how the play fits into the modernist scheme has not yet been adequately analyzed. Millay, overtly aware of modernist conventions, chooses to employ the use of self-referential medium in order to critique realism, the theater, and sentimentalism. The following section will explore how these critiques prove Millay’s modernist tendencies so much so that *Aria Da Capo* has never been sufficiently analyzed beyond what their existence implies about Millay’s alignment with the modernist movement.

The most obvious modernist aspect of *Aria Da Capo* is the play’s critique of realism via its preoccupation with form. The play begins as any other theater production might; that is, the audience is meant to suspend their disbelief and act as though the action on the stage is “reality,” regardless of how unrealistic it might seem. We are meant to believe that the characters are living and behaving as though the world they inhabit in the play is real. The audience is as reliant on the play or playwright’s ability to make a believable world as the production is reliant on the audience believing the action on the stage; this creates a codependency between play and audience that acts as a contract, ensuring the desired response from the other party. Millay soon breaks this contract, however, when Cothurnus enters the stage for the first time and Pierrot
breaks character: “Whadda you think this is,” Pierrot demands, “a dress-rehearsal?” (Millay). Throughout the runtime, Millay brings our attention to the form of the play multiple times: Cothurnus holds a prompt book while Thyrsis and Corydon perform their pastoral scene, he tells invisible stagehands to “Strike the scene!” after the shepherds die, Cothurnus even references the audience directly after Pierrot and Columbine discover the shepherds’ bodies (Millay). The audience is constantly taken out of the world of the characters and asked to instead direct our attention to the medium itself—the play and the script. With this technique, Millay is deliberately contributing to the modernist convention of self-referential medium. The modernists’ “interest in medium aimed to strip away unnecessary traditional artistic conventions in order to identify that which is essential to the form” (“Artistic Medium”). In other words, modernists strove to strip down art to its foundational components: the form—the poem, painting, or play—and the elements that form is composed of—the words of the poem, the paint and the canvas, or the characters and the script. Modernists, including Millay, use this technique to persuade the audience to be critical of how a piece of art portrays the world. The audience constantly questions the validity of the world that Millay creates and so hopefully will be influenced to question any piece of work that claims to be representing reality. Realism claims to be acting as a window through which we can view the “real;” modernists understand this claim to be false and choose to break that frame and force the audience to see how that representation of the real is really just a representation rather than a form that is true to life. Engagement with this critique allows Millay to take full part in modernist practice and thus makes her performance of a pure modern artist believable and, to many, unquestionable.

Millay, after exposing the play for its form, uses an element of this form, the props in the shepherd’s scene, to bolster her performance of modernist conventions. After Cothurnus
demands the stage from Pierrot and Columbine, he calls Thyris and Corydon, the young shepherds, from their dressing room. The shepherds are resistant to playing their scene, especially since the stage is set for a farce; Thyris protests that they “cannot act/A tragedy with comic properties” (Millay). Cothurnus responds: “Try it and see./I think you’ll find you can,” and the shepherds proceed with the play (Millay). As the scene progresses, the shepherds decide to build a wall between themselves and play a game of war. Lacking any real building materials, “They weave a wall of colored crepe paper ribbons [sic]” that had been previously set with Pierrot and Columbine’s meal (Millay). Corydon eventually “stumbles over a bowl of colored confetti and colored paper ribbons [sic]” and signals to the audience through his lines that they are jewels (Millay). Thyris then finds a black root, really just black confetti, and uses it to “poison” a bowl of water. The shepherds use these strips of confetti to kill each other; Thyris poisons Corydon with the water as Corydon strangles Thyris with a string of confetti jewels (Millay).

Millay uses these props to again prioritize the form above content in order to force the audience to question theatrical conventions and their legitimacy. None of these props are, of course, real. One may argue that the limits of theater make prop work like this necessary—a director obviously cannot expect an actor to actually poison his scene-mate—but the choice of the props is what is critically different here. In all of the examples above, the props are the same material: confetti paper. Whereas a realistic play would have employed hyper-realistic props, perhaps styrofoam or wood painted like rocks for the wall and costume jewelry for the precious stones, Millay makes a conscious decision to use props that force the audience to remember that they are watching a theatrical production. The form is exposed to such an extent that the audience cannot ever passively consume the action. Therefore, the audience, forced to reinterpret
the props countless times within the unsteady and obviously false “reality” that Millay has created, becomes critical of this theatrical convention. Millay, aware of this, wants to imbue her audience with the ability to question the nature of all theatrical performances. Leaving _Aria Da Capo_, the audience will have the ability to ask how any and all theatrical productions have influenced them to passively believe the action on stage, up to and including murder. She asks her audience to be critical of how the art they consume influences them to see the world in a certain way. Millay, just as her contemporaries, thus unmasks the falsehoods of the very medium that she contributes to; to those viewing and reading the play on surface level, this decision is indicative of modernist conventions and nothing more.

Additionally, having exposed the various falsehoods of both realism and the theater, Millay then exemplifies the modernists antagonism towards sentimentalism with the metadrama of Thyris and Corydon’s scene. After Thyris has been strangled and Corydon slowly dies from the poison, Corydon questions how their game of war has ended so tragically: “this is a very silly game,” Corydon cries, “Why do we play it?” (Millay). Throughout the scene, we are meant to get the sense that this “game” is getting out of hand and that Thyris and Corydon are being subjected to Cothurnus’ malicious control. If this were true, however, the metadrama would not exist as it does. Cothurnus tells the shepherds, “The important thing is that you speak the lines,/And make the gestures. Wherefore I shall remain/Throughout, and hold the prompt-book./Are you ready?” to which the shepherds’ reply: “Sir, we are always ready” (Millay). Thyris and Corydon are always aware that they are in a scene, Cothurnus even holds a prompt book in the event that the shepherds forget their lines. Although by the end of the scene we may believe that the shepherds truly did not mean to kill each other, their deaths have been in the script from the beginning. The result of the scene has nothing to do with the shepherds’ true
feelings, rather it is solely dependent upon their believable performance of the scene. The apparently horrific act of the double murder is proven to instead be a ploy to manipulate the audience’s emotions; we are meant to be shocked, saddened, disturbed even, by this scene. The audience’s reaction is what is actually important for the success of the scene and it matters not at all that the shepherds “are not in the fancy/To play the play” (Millay). Millay, rather than directly adhering to sentimentalist conventions, uses the shepherds and their metadrama to instead participate in a critique of the genre. As an “attack on sentimentality was one of the few threads uniting” the modernists (Bell 160), Millay makes this rhetorical move in tandem with her contemporaries and so proves her legitimacy as a modern artist. Therefore, there is no question that *Aria Da Capo* is a modernist play.

However, Millay is not satisfied with the limited view that modernism provides and so reveals the problems that exist in the very movement that she herself is contributing to. Until this point, scholars have all but ignored the tension that exists between Millay’s modernist leanings and her antagonism towards its practice. *Aria Da Capo* cannot be considered a purely modernist text because the ideals of modernism are usurped throughout the play time and again. Millay proves that modernism, without limit, has the dangerous ability to cause art to become meaningless, inhuman, and forgetful. *Aria Da Capo* unveils these dangers and destabilizes Millay’s seemingly secure place within the modernist tradition. Millay, however, is unconcerned with her place in modernist canon and instead uses this instability to imagine a creative existence beyond what was available to artists at the time she was writing *Aria Da Capo*.

Millay deploys her most obvious critique of modernism through Pierrot; indeed, there is a whole section of dialogue in which he makes an obvious performance of critiquing modern art and modernist social movements. Pierrot, unsatisfied with his feast, entertains himself by trying
on different modernist personalities. First, claiming to be a painter, Pierrot clearly satirizes Marcel Duchamp and similar artists with his piece “Woman Taking in Cheese from Fire-Escape” (Millay). The painting consists of a seemingly meaningless array of shapes and objects: “six orange bull’s-eyes, four green pin-wheels, /And one magenta jelly-roll” (Millay). Pierrot then imagines himself as a pianist, creating a “sound . . . On a new scale . . . Without tonality” (Millay). This is an obvious parody of the atonal and twelve tone music of Arnold Schoenberg (Levenson 39). Pierrot is a socialist next, he “love[s]/Humanity” but “hate[s] people” (Millay). These art forms and social movements seem maladaptive and ridiculous in this context. The artists and activists of the early twentieth century prided themselves on innovation and yet Millay understands that, in practice, there is a limit to such beliefs. While Millay may use some modernist techniques, she clearly sees the drawbacks of being too entrenched in the movement. She believes that modernist sensibilities, in too large a quantity, can make art essentially meaningless. Millay therefore refuses to adhere to modernist conventions fully and instead chooses to explore how even the most radical movements actually undermine the intentions of art and artists.

Next, Millay turns to Cothurnus to explore the moral implications of the modernist movement and its rejection of realism and sentimentality. Cothurnus’ surface role in *Aria Da Capo* is one of a director, but anyone who is familiar with modernist theater will recognize him as a failed representation of Gordon Craig’s über-marionette. (Levenson 189). The über-marionette is “a reliable figure, one not subject to emotion, one indifferent to realism, impersonal and detached” (Levenson 189). Although Craig envisioned this persona as a literal puppet, without flesh and blood (Levenson 189), we can see these attributes in Cothurnus. When Thyrsis
and Corydon forget their lines, he immediately and mechanically prompts them (Millay). The stage directions after the shepherds have died also exemplify his impersonal nature:

*Cothurnus closes the prompt-book with a bang, arises matter-of-factly, comes down the stage, and places the table over the two bodies, drawing down the cover so that they are hidden from any actors on the stage, but visible to the audience, pushing in their feet and hands with his boot. He then turns his back to the audience, and claps his hands twice [sic] (Millay).*

While Gordon Craig envisioned an inhuman puppet that would “[recover] an ancient theatricality” and “destroy a debased modern realism” (Levenson 190), Millay illuminates the moral predicament that such a figure creates. Art, in essence, is an exploration of human nature, and by eradicating human agents, modernists undermine the primary purpose for creating art. In their attempts to remove themselves from realism and sentimentality, they have discarded even their humanity. Millay cannot abide by this transgression and so creates Cothurnus, the inhuman über-marionette, as a figure to be distrusted and even despised. Although Millay does not trust sentimentality fully, neither does she support the removal of emotion entirely. The modernists were too radical in their attempt to subvert sentimentality and Millay highlights the tension that exists between these extremes in order to separate herself from both movements.

She also sees this outright antagonism to former literary movements as potentially dangerous; she warns about these harms in Pierrot and Columbine’s reaction to the shepherds’ deaths. The Harlequinade characters, falling prey to the sentimentality of the shepherds’ scene, are genuinely upset when they find the dead bodies hidden under their table. Millay adds a suggestion in the character notes for this reveal: “For a moment the two characters seem almost to feel and be subdued by the tragedy that has taken place” (Millay). Yet, it is odd that Pierrot
and Columbine would not recognize the ending of the shepherd’s scene. Pierrot acknowledges that the bodies are “the two shepherds from the other play,” and so recognizes the actors (Millay); but he and Columbine are oblivious to the plot of that scene and are shocked by finding the bodies under their table. If the actors are performing their scenes on the same night, on the same stage, the fact that they have no knowledge of the other scene’s plot is strange and concerning. This ignorance is analogous to the modernists’ own refusal to interact with or take part in any other genre or movement conventions. The Harlequinade and the Greek pastoral are obviously theatrical genres with different expectations and traditions and while Thyrsis and Corydon have some knowledge of the Harlequinade (they, at the very least, understand that it is a farce), Pierrot and Columbine have no knowledge of the Greek pastoral and its action. They then acquiesce to hide the bodies from the house, refusing the audience continued knowledge of the scene. In the same way, the modernist movement strived to eradicate the genre conventions that were prevalent in previous eras and thus suppressed the knowledge of other ways of producing art from the general public. Thyrsis and Corydon do not revive after the table is moved over their bodies, and thus, modernism became the only method for producing work that was able to continue forward. Millay writes *Aria Da Capo* as an outright rebellion against this practice, choosing instead to highlight the affordances, both positive and negative, of multiple genres. Millay is interested in exploring the possibilities that exist in all genres and so problematizes the practice of genre control.

The problem of new movements erasing the conventions of old is not relegated to just modernism; Millay understands genre prescription as a whole to be an unforgiving confine, one that controls not only the audience’s experience but also that of artists. We will turn again to Cothurnus. In the *dramatis personae*, the character list, Cothurnus is listed as the “Masque of
Tragedy” (Millay). This description is literal; he is the masque, the performance, the staging, the facade, of the Greek tragedy. He does not simply act as the face of that scene, however. We know him to be the controlling force of the entire production, even over Pierrot and Columbine—although he does not seem to be their director as he is with Thyrsis and Corydon. He tells the shepherds, “I am the scene” when they resist performing their play (Millay). Cothurnus decides what will be seen by the house, who is on stage, and what lines are said. In short, he is the one who decides what genre will be visible and what conventions are acceptable in that genre. Whether that figure be popular culture, or figurehead artists, or propaganda (Fahy), the controlling forces of genre are meant to be seen as unforgiving and demanding. When Thyrsis and Corydon admit that they “are always ready” to play the scene, Millay instructs that the line be said “sorrowfully” (Millay). The characters are mournful at having to perform their piece exactly as Cothurnus dictates. Millay makes it clear in Aria Da Capo that the controlling nature of genre conventions only leads to a disconnected and unhappy artistic life, as artists are forced to adhere to accepted forms and erase any semblance of difference or uniqueness that they may have.

As we have seen, Millay’s battle with genre prescription is not new, Aria Da Capo seems only to be the outward manifestation of this struggle; it is ironic, then, that the play has been described as a modernist text without fail. Although Millay does follow some modernist conventions, she is aware of the shortcomings of the movement. Instead of subscribing to the modernist’s version of depicting reality, she undermines the validity of that representation. Therefore, Aria Da Capo cannot legitimately be read as a purely modernist text.

Instead, Millay chooses to delve beyond any literary movement that was available to her previously, thus anticipating the postmodern and poststructuralist movements that would not
begin until the late 20th century. Although Millay would not have understood her own choices in this way, looking back, it is clear that in her attempt to do something new (even newer than what the modernists offered), Millay employs tactics that are indicative of the later postmodern movement. Postmodern philosophers “deny that there are aspects of reality that are objective” (Duignan) while poststructuralists believe “that language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a ‘truth’ or ‘reality’” (“poststructuralism”). This movement therefore denies the possibility that any genre can adequately portray the “real.” Millay takes a similar stance in *Aria Da Capo*. While she at first seems to be fully indoctrinated in the modernist’s version of reality, upon closer reading, she proves that no genre can adequately portray the real world. Realism, rather than being a window through which one can view the unadulterated world, is actually a lifelike facade that mirrors only what we expect to see. Theater often professes to be an enactment of real life while it really only consists of a script, actors, and props who perform a playwright’s version of reality. Sentimentalism professes that it engages with real emotions when it actually is a manipulation tactic that ensures the text’s success. Finally, this leaves the modernists, who, in their attempt to separate themselves fully from the previous eras of creation, have devised a reality that is nonsensical and apathetic to humanity. Millay strives to separate herself fully from all of these forms.

Millay cares not at all about the absence of objective truth. Leaving *Aria Da Capo*, the audience is left with more questions than answers; they wonder how much of what they witnessed was actually “real.” The answer to this question is the lynchpin of this entire play: it doesn’t matter. If the play influenced the audience to think critically about what they were viewing, then it was a success. If each audience member found even one truth that they can take with them from the theater, then Millay has done her job as an artist. While modernists
antagonize over the idea of a lack of objective truth, Millay uses it as an opportunity for interpretation and artistic freedom. Millay, above all else, reveres artistic choice.

Millay, just as the eventual postmodernists, does not offer a representation of reality that she claims is the most true, she instead portrays the endless cycle of attempting the real that all artists fall prey to. *Aria Da Capo* does not truly end, the curtain closes as Pierrot and Columbine restart their scene exactly as before. We are meant to assume that the actors continue to perform, perhaps in perpetuity. What we receive at the end of *Aria Da Capo* is not the satisfying conclusion to the action of the play; rather, the Harlequinade actors, having changed very little from the opening of the curtain, try again to accomplish their task of finishing their scene. Instead of ending the play after the double murder, Pierrot and Columbine persist and attempt to continue producing art in the face of that tragedy. What is this cycle other than the artist’s plight? Art is meant to represent the real, whether that be true emotions, the state of social or political affairs, a literal representation of the world, or otherwise. Artists are condemned to attempt to fulfill this purpose and regardless of what may happen to change the social, political, or artistic climate, they will forever be stuck in this same predicament. The play will never end; the *performance* of the real will never be adequately stripped away. “The real” is unattainable. Millay is nonetheless aware that artists cannot abandon this pursuit, regardless of how useless the attempt may be.

She herself was intimately familiar with this cruel cycle but still persisted in the face of opposition in order to be fulfilled as an artist. Despite critics displaying lukewarm and even antagonistic opinions about her works, Millay continued to create art that displayed her own interpretation of the world rather than adhering to any particular popular movement. Millay’s overall unsteady critical success speaks to her noticeable rebellion against each new version of
“the real” that arose in her lifetime. Although more recent scholars have done impressive recovery work, there is still much debate surrounding her texts. Scholars may attempt to bring Millay into focus by examining her texts under different lenses, but there is a reason that none of them seem to fit quite right. Yes, Millay was knowledgeable of and practiced in deploying many different genre conventions. However, as multiple scholars have noticed, there exists tension behind the use of these techniques. Millay refused to subscribe to one genre or movement solely; she was fond of crafting complex conversations between these techniques that led to, while often not a completely satisfying end, a result that is indicative of Millay’s personal struggle in portraying reality. She continued to produce works that felt true to her personally, regardless of how well they may have fit into the larger milieu. Millay does not attempt to convince the audience to subscribe to her version of reality as she claims that the practitioners of other genres do; rather, she lays out her own artistic perception and leaves it for us to interpret how we will, uncaring if we agree or not. Objectively, “the real” may not exist, but artists have a responsibility to produce the closest version of their own reality, not for the sake of others, but for their own artistic fulfillment.

*Aria Da Capo* therefore continues to be relevant today as directors and actors reinterpret the text and attempt to find purpose within the lack of objective truth that is so prevalent in our postmodern world. While some may argue that this is another aspect that marks the play as modernist—the modernists, after all, “requir[ed] the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text” (Kuiper)—more is at work here, still. Modernists base their works off of an assumed objective truth while *Aria Da Capo* remains open for subjective truth only. The play remains ambiguous in its setting, and one may interpret its action in a number of ways: it may be acted as a comedy or as a tragedy, a director may want to highlight the anti-war allegory or they might
focus more on the character of Cothurnus and his role in the production, the possible routes of production are infinite. As artists continue to create in the atmosphere of the postmodern and post-postmodern, they endeavor to find meaning within a world where truth and reality no longer seem possible. The only place they now can turn is their own personal truths that can hopefully provide reason to continue creating art and reflect even a small part of the human experience.

Millay’s works continue to be analyzed not only for their historical relevance but also for the achingly personal truths that they contain. Her popularity has therefore returned to the state in which it existed at the height of her success. Although at first glance it may seem separate from Millay’s personal life, *Aria Da Capo* proves to be different from her poetry only in that it provides a glimpse into her artistic reality rather than her thoughts about femininity, womanhood, or love. To Millay, objective truth was never a factor in her creative process and we as scholars would be remiss to ignore this fact. While the recovery work scholars do is important to revitalize Millay’s importance, we must be careful to avoid confining her works into boxes that will never allow them to exist as they were meant to be.
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