

Jolyon Laycock

Six Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay



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Edna St. Vincent Millay
for mezzo-soprano and piano (2012)

*First performed by Lore Lixenberg
accompanied by the composer
at Arnolfini, Bristol
Friday 11 May 2012*



Portrait of Millay: Vassar Collage photo

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1 Paradise Row, Woollard
BRISTOL BS39 4HY
England

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for mezzo-soprano and piano

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Poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay (c) 1917, 1945.

The composer gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society at Steepletop, Austerlitz, New York, USA. www.millay.org

These 6 sonnets first appeared in 1917 as part of a collection entitled “Renascence and Other Poems”, the first volume of poems published by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950). Their clear metrical structure, their brevity, their use of simple language and their directness of emotional expression make them ideal for setting to music. They are an intense expression of love, loss and bereavement. They read like dramatic soliloquys rather than literary poems and seem to follow in a dramatic sequence. It is for this reason that I have set the poems in the same order as they are printed..

During the 1920s Millay was popularly regarded as a cynic, rebel and feminist. Her marriage to Eugen Jan Boissevain which began in 1923 was famously “open” and both had several lovers. As a “liberated woman” Millay was bisexual, a fact evidenced in the 6 sonnets. Five of them are about lost love but the lover’s gender is sometimes female and sometimes male or perhaps deliberately ambiguous.

The first sonnet is ironic, even sarcastic in tone with its opening line: “Thou art not lovelier than lilacs...”. Assuming that her lover is indeed female, Millay seems to be comparing lesbian love with heterosexual love. Love for a woman is like a poison that can “destroy some men” to which the poet, as another woman, is immune. The second sonnet is a heart-rendingly poignant expression of grief after the death of male lover. The third is a nostalgic evocation of a beautiful affair that has come to an end without grief or rancour. The lover’s gender is ambiguous but phrases like “But you were something more than young and sweet and fair...” suggests a lesbian relationship. The fourth sonnet presents a desolate landscape of the soul, bereft of love. The fifth is about social taboos concerning the public expression of grief. Millay imagines how she would react in a public place such as the New York subway to the surprise news of her male lover’s death. Finally the sixth sonnet – the only one to bear a title: “Bluebeard” – shows love turned to hatred. This is Bluebeard with a difference. Millay assumes the persona of a female version of the serial wife beater and murderer of legend. The mysterious door and the forbidden room do not conceal the familiar chamber of horrors. Instead they stand as a symbol of a personal private mental space. An over-possessive lover is rejected because he or she has become too inquisitive, prying into the inner secrets of the poet’s soul.

I thank my American daughter-in-law Christine for first introducing me to the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Cover image: The grave site of Millay and Boissevain at Steepletop, Austerlitz.

Jolyon Laycock,
1 April 2011

6 Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay

I

Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, – no,
Nor honeysuckle; thou art not more fair
Than small white single poppies, – I can bear
Their beauty; though I bend before thee, though
From left to right, not knowing where to go,
I turn my troubled eyes, nor here nor there
Find any refuge from thee, yet I swear
So has it been with mist, – and moonlight so.

Like him who day by day unto his draught
Of delicate poison adds him one drop more
Till he may drink unharmed the death of ten,
Even so, inured to beauty, who have quaffed
Each hour more deeply than the hour before,
I drink – and live – what has destroyed some men.

II

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountainside,
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year's bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear
To go, – so with his memory they brim!
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

III

Mindful of you the sodden earth in spring,
And all the flowers that in the springtime grow,
And dusty roads, and thistles, and the slow
Rising of the round moon, and all throats that sing
The summer through, and each departing wing,
And all the nests that the bared branches show,
And all winds that in any weather blow,
And all the storms that the four seasons bring.

You go no more on your exultant feet
Up paths that only mist and morning knew,
Or watch the wind, or listen to the beat
Of a bird's wings too high in air to view, –
But you were something more than young and sweet
And fair, – and the long year remembers you.

IV

Not in this chamber only at my birth –
When the long hours of that mysterious night
Were over, and the morning was in sight –
I cried, but in strange places, steppe and firth
I have not seen, through alien grief and mirth;
And never shall one room contain me quite
Who in so many rooms first saw the light,
Child of all mothers, native of the earth.

So is no warmth for me at any fire
Today, when the world's fire has burned so low;
I kneel, spending my breath in vain desire,
At that cold hearth which one time roared so strong,
And straighten back in weariness, and long
To gather up my little gods and go.

V

If I should learn in some quite casual way,
That you were gone, not to return again –
Read from the back page of a paper, say,
Held by a neighbour in a subway train,
How at the corner of this avenue
And such a street (so are the papers filled)
A hurrying man – who happened to be you –
At noon today had happened to be killed,

I should not cry aloud – I could not cry
Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place –
I should but watch the station lights rush by
With a more careful interest on my face,
Or raise my eyes and read with greater care
Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

VI

Bluebeard

This door you might not open, and you did;
So enter now, and see for what slight thing
You are betrayed... Here is no treasure hid,
No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring
The sought-for truth, no heads of women slain
For greed like yours, no writhings of distress,
But only what you see... Look yet again –
An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.

Yet this alone out of my life I kept
Unto myself, lest any know me quite;
And you did so profane me when you crept
Unto the threshold of this room tonight
That I must never more behold your face.
This now is yours. I seek another place.

Andante (with irony)

Sonnet I

♩=72

Soprano

Thou art not love-li-er than li lacs,

Piano

4

S.

no, Nor hon-ey-suck-le; thou art not more

Pno.

7

S.

fair Thansmall white sing - le pop - pies.

Pno.

9

S.

I can bear thy beau - ty;

Pno.

11

S. *3* *3*
though I bend be - fore thee, though From left to right, not

Pno. *f* *p*

14

S. *5* *5*
know - ing where to go I turn my trou - bled eyes, nor here nor there Find

Pno.

16

S. *3* *f* *mf*
an - y re - fuge from thee, yet I

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf*

Red.

18

S. *3* *p*
swear So has it been with mist, with

Pno. *p*

Red.

20

S. moon - light so,

Pno. *mf* *mp* *mf*

22

S. with moon - light so.

Pno. *p* *pp*

24

S. Like him who day by day un - to his

Pno. *f* *p* *f* *p*

26

S. draught Of del - i - cate poi - son adds him one drop more, Till he may drink un -

Pno. *mp* *mf* *f* *p* *mf*

28 *f* *mp* *f* *mp*

S. harmed the death of ten, Ev - en so, in-ured to beau - ty, who have

Pno. *f* *p* *mf* *f*

30

S. quaffed Each hour more deep - ly than the hour be-fore I

Pno. *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

32 *ff* *sub p*

S. drink and live what has des-troyed some

Pno. *ff*

34 *ff*

S. men, de - stroyed some men.

Pno. *p* *pp* *ff*

Soprano

Piano

p *mf* *p*

9

S. *mf*

Time does not bring re - lief.

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf* *sva*

18

S.

You all have lied who told me time would

Pno. *p* *mf*

26

S. *mf*

ease me of my pain I miss him in the

Pno. *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

33

S. weep-ing of the rain; I want him in the shrink-ing

Pno. *p* *mf*

41

S. of the tide; The old snows melt from ev'-ry

Pno. *f* *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

49

S. moun-tain side; And last years leaves are smoke in

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

57

S. ev'-ry lane; But last year's bit-ter lov-ing

Pno. *mf* *p* *f* *ff*

65 *f* *p*

S. must re - main heap'd on my heart, and my

Pno. *mf* *p*

71 **poco rall.**

S. old thoughts a - bide

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf*

78 - **piu mosso** ♩=112 *mf*

S. There are a hun - dred plac - es where I

Pno. *p* *sf* *mf*

84

S. fear to go so with his

Pno. *p* *p* *sf*

89 *pp* **meno mosso**

S. mem - or - y _____ they brim! And ent'ring with re -

Pno. *mf* *pp*

94

S. lief some qui - et place Where ne - ver fell his foot or shone his face I say:

Pno.

101 *rubato* *mf* **poco rall.** **Tempo primo** *ff*

S. "There is no mem'ry of him here!" And so standstrick-en

Pno. *p* *sf*

108 **molto rall.** *f* *pp*

S. so re - mem-b'ring him!

Pno. *ff* *p* *ff* *pp*

Sonnet III

Allegretto semplice ♩=88

Soprano

Piano

6

S.

Mind - ful of you the sod - den earth in spring,

Pno.

10

S.

And all the flow'rs that in the spring time grow, And dus - ty

Pno.

14

S.

roads and thist - les, and the slow - ri - sing of the round moon, all

Pno.

poco rall.

18

S. throats that sing The sum - mer through, and each de - part - ing wing

Pno. *mf*

21 **a tempo**

S. *p* And all the nests that bar'd branch-es show_ *mf* And all___

Pno. *p* *mf*

25

S. winds that in an - y wea - ther blow, And all the

Pno. *mf* *f*

28 *f* **poco rall.**

S. storms that the four sea - sons bring.

Pno. *f* *p*

30 **meno mosso** *p*

S. You go no more on your ex - ult - ant feet up paths that

Pno.

34 *mf* **a tempo I** *mf*

S. on - ly mist and morn ing knew, Or watch the

Pno. *mf* *pp* *mf* *p*

37

S. wind, or list - en to the beat of a

Pno. *pp* *mf*

40

S. *bird's wing too high in air to*

Pno. *p mf p*

42

S. *view, But you were*

Pno. *mf f ppp p*

45

S. *some thing more than young and sweet And fair, and the long*

Pno. *pp p*

poco rit. a tempo

49

S. *year re - mem - bers you.*

Pno. *pp p pp*

poco rall.

Sonnet IV

Andante ♩ 54

Soprano

p

Not in this chamber on ly at my

Piano

4

S.

birth When the long hours of that my - ster

Pno.

8

S.

ious night were o - ver and the morn - ing was in sight I

Pno.

mf *p*

11

S.

cried, but in strange pla ces steppe and firth I have not

Pno.

mf *p* *f*

14 *mf* *p*

S. *mf* *p*

seen, through a - li - en grief and mirth; And ne - ver shall one

Pno. *mf*

18 *mf*

S. *mf*

room con - tain me quite Who in so man - y rooms first saw the light,

Pno.

22 *f* *mf*

S. *f* *mf*

Child of all mo - thers, na - tive of the earth.

Pno. *f* *mf*

26

S.

Pno. *p* *pp*

29 *pp* *p*

S. So is no warmth for me at any fire To -

Pno.

32 *pp* *mf*

S. day, when the world's fire has burn'd so

Pno.

35 *p* *pp*

S. low I kneel, spend-ing my breath in

Pno.

37 *p*

S. vain de - sire, At that cold

Pno.

39 *mf* *f*

S. hearth which one time roar'd so

Pno. *mf* *f*

42 *ff*

S. strong, And straight-en back in wear

Pno. *ff*

44 *sub p*

S. i- ness, and long To ga ther up my lit - tle

Pno. *sub p* *pp* *p*

48 *poco rall.* *mf*

S. gods and go.

Pno. *pp* *p* *mf* *pp* *p* *mf* *pp*

Sonnet V

Allegro molto ♩=160
poco rall. a tempo

Soprano

mf

If I should learn, in some quite cas-ual way, that

Piano

p *mf*

10

S.

f *mf*

you were gone, not to re-turn a-gain, Read from the back page of a

Pno.

f *mf*

18

S.

mf

pa-per, say, Held by a neigh-bour in a sub-way train, How

Pno.

p *p*

poco rall. a tempo

27

S.

p sotto voce

at the corn-ner of this a-ve-nue And such a street (so are the

Pno.

mf *f* *sub p*

36 **poco rall.** **a tempo**

S. *mf*
 pa - pers fill'd) A hur - ry - ing man who hap - pen'd

Pno.

43 **poco rall.** **a tempo**

S.
 to be you At noon to - day had

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf*

50 **rall.** **meno mosso** ♩ = 112

S. *p*
 hap-pen'd to be kill'd, should not cry a-

Pno. *ff* *p*

58 *f*

S. *f*
 loud I could not cry a - loud, or wring my hands in

Pno. *f* *mf*

64 **poco accel.** *mf*

S. such a place I should but watch the sta - tion lights rush

Pno. *p* *mf*

71 **tempo I poco rall. . . . a tempo I** *mf*

S. by with a more care - ful in - trest on my face, Or

Pno. *mf*

80 *f* *p*

S. raise my eyes and read with great - er care where to store

Pno. *f* *p*

87 **rall.** *mf*

S. furs and how to treat the hair.

Pno. *mf*

Sonnet VI "Bluebeard"

Lento ♩=96

Soprano

Piano

5

S.

Pno.

9

S.

Pno.

12

S.

This door you might not o-pen,

Pno.

16

S. *mf*
and_ you did;

Pno. *pp* *p*

Ped.

19

S. *mf*
So en - ter now,

Pno. *f* *pp* *f*

Ped.

23

S. and see_____ for__

Pno. *p* *ff* *ppp*

Ped.

26

S. what_ slight_ thing_ you are be - trayed..._____

Pno. *pp*

Ped.

29 *p* Here is no trea-sure hid, *mf* no caul - dron,

Pno. *p* *ff* *ppp* 5 Ped. 5

32 *p* no clear crys - tal mir -

Pno. *pp* *p* *mf* Ped. Ped.

35 *mf* ror - ing The sought for truth,

Pno. *pp* *mf* *p* Ped. Ped.

38 *f* No heads of wo-men slain For

Pno. *ff* *ppp* 5 *pp* Ped. 5 Ped.

41

S. *p sotto voce*

greed like yours, no wri - things of dis - tress, But

Pno. *mf* *p*

Ped.

44

S.

on - ly what you see... Look yet a - gain An

Pno. *pp* *pp*

Ped.

48

S.

emp - ty room, cob-webb'd and com - fort less.

Pno. *mp* *p*

Ped.

51

piu mosso ♩=112 (tempo II)

S. *f*

Yet this a - lone

Pno. *ff* *f* *mf*

55 *mf* *f* *mf*

S. out of my life I kept Un-to my - self, lest

Pno.

59 *f* *f*

S. an - y know me quite; And you did so pro-

Pno.

molto allargando **a tempo II**

63 *ff* *p*

S. fane me when you crept Un - to the thresh - old of this

Pno.

67 *mf* *f*

S. room to-night That I must ne - ver more be - hold your

Pno.

71 **tempo I** *ff* **violente**

S. *face.*

Pno. *f* *p* *ff*

Ped.

74 *f*

S. This now is yours.

Pno. *p* *ppp* *pp*

Ped.

79 **tempo II** *f*

S. I seek an - o - ther place.

Pno. *p* *f* *mf*

83

S.

Pno. *cresc.* *ff*

Biographical notes

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1894-1950) is one of America's most important national poets. She used the pseudonym **Nancy Boyd** for her prose work. Millay's fame began in 1912 when she entered her poem *Renascence* in a poetry contest in *The Lyric Year*. The poem was widely considered the best submission and when it was ultimately awarded fourth place it created a scandal which brought Millay publicity. Millay described her life in New York as "very, very poor and very, very merry." Her poetry is immortalised by a quotation from *Recuerdo* (1919) reproduced above the entrance to the Staten Island ferry:

*We were very tired, we were very merry –
We had gone back and forth all night upon the ferry.*

Millay was popularly regarded as a cynic, rebel and feminist. Her marriage to Eugen Jan Boissevain, which began in 1923, was famously "open". Both had several lovers over the 26 years until Boissevain's death in 1949. Openly bisexual, Millay counted among her close friends the writer Floyd Dell and the critic Edmund Wilson, both of whom proposed marriage to her and were refused. Her 1920 collection *A Few Figs From Thistles* drew controversy for its novel exploration of female sexuality and feminism. In 1923 she became only the third woman to win the Pulitzer Prize with *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*.

In 1925, Boissevain and Millay bought *Steepletop* near Austerlitz, New York, formerly a 635-acre blueberry farm. *Steepletop* is now the home of the Millay Colony for the Arts, an artist residency programme offering residencies to visual artists, writers, poets and composers. It was founded in 1973 by the poet's sister Norma Millay Ellis, and her husband, Charles Frederick Ellis, a painter and actor. Millay's former house and gardens, maintained by the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, are a National Historical Landmark. *Steepletop* is named after a pink, conical wildflower that grows there.

Jolyon Laycock was born in Bath in 1946 and studied for B.Mus. and M.Phil. in composition at the University of Nottingham. His composition teachers included Henri Pousseur and Cornelius Cardew. Later in life he studied for his Ph.D. at York University under Nicola Lefanu. During the 1970s he pursued a freelance career as an experimental sound artist based at the Birmingham Arts Laboratory and Spectro Arts Workshop, Newcastle. In 1979 he took up the post of Music and Dance Co-ordinator at the Arnolfini, running a programme of contemporary music and dance regarded as one of the most innovative outside London. In 1990 he became Concert Director at the University of Bath and at the newly opened Michael Tippett Centre at Bath Spa University College where he founded the award-winning concert series *Rainbow over Bath*. He left the University in 2000 to complete his book *A Changing Role for the Composer in Society*. In 2004 he was appointed Senior Lecturer in Arts Management at Oxford Brookes University until 2010. He has been Chairman of the Severnside Composers Alliance since 2010.

In 2012 he won the EPSS Jubilee Song Competition with his setting of Philip Larkin's *The North Ship* which led to a collaboration with Sarah Leonard resulting in the composition of *Dark Seas*, a setting of five poems of Philip Larkin for soprano, clarinet and piano. Other song settings include *Three Shakespeare Sonnets* and *Mountains of the Mind*, a cycle of 12 poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins www.jolyonlaycock.uk