

Lines of Feeling: Modernist Women's Poetry and the Problem of Sentimentality

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WOMEN POETS DOMINATED THE AMERICAN POETRY SCENE IN THE 1920s. **Edna St. Vincent Millay** was the widely acknowledged leader of a new generation of women poets, which also included **Louise Bogan**, **Genevieve Taggard**, **Sara Teasdale**, and **Elinor Wylie**. Their bold, provocative poems helped a generation of young Americans, coming of age in the aftermath of World War I, navigate the changing conventions of modern love. Their poems filled the pages of popular periodicals, such as the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, and *Vanity Fair*, and they were awarded the field's most prestigious honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, which Millay won in 1923. From the vantage of the 1920s, no one could have predicted how radically their reputations would change in subsequent decades.

Why did the reputations of so many women poets fall, as the discipline of literary studies rose? What did literary studies lose when it left these women poets behind?

THE MYTH OF THE SENTIMENTAL POETESS

- In the 1920s, these women poets were not considered to be sentimental. ***They became sentimental***, beginning in the 1930s, in the writings of the New Criticism.
- The New Critics re-categorized women's poetry as sentimental in order to distinguish it from "serious," "intellectual" poetry by male poets such as T.S. Eliot.
- These accusations of sentimentality were the result of cultural biases and prejudices against women and femininity.

UNSENTIMENTAL WOMEN

- Much of what **WE THINK WE KNOW** about modernist women's poetry is a distortion, created by a biased literary academy.
- We should **ALWAYS QUESTION** what we have been told about women's poetry.
- **HISTORICAL RESEARCH** can enrich our perspective on women's poetry.
- Countless **UNPUBLISHED** and **FORGOTTEN** works by women poets are waiting to be discovered in the **ARCHIVE**.
- Women's poetry is **SURPRISING!**



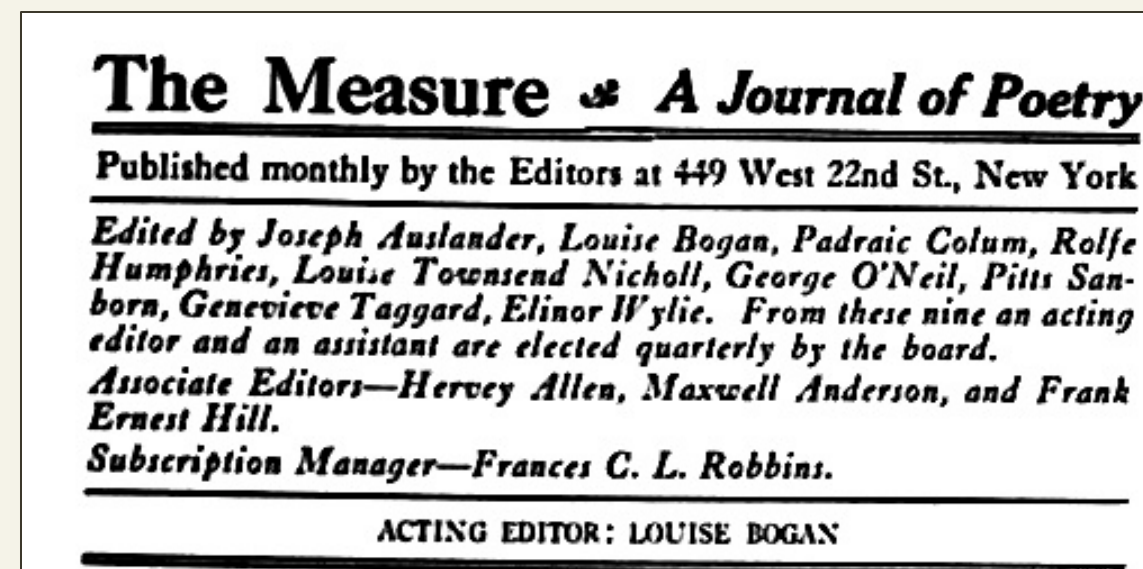
Photo of Sara Teasdale circa 1920, Sara Teasdale Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



Photo of Elinor Wylie taken by Carl Van Vechten in 1922, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



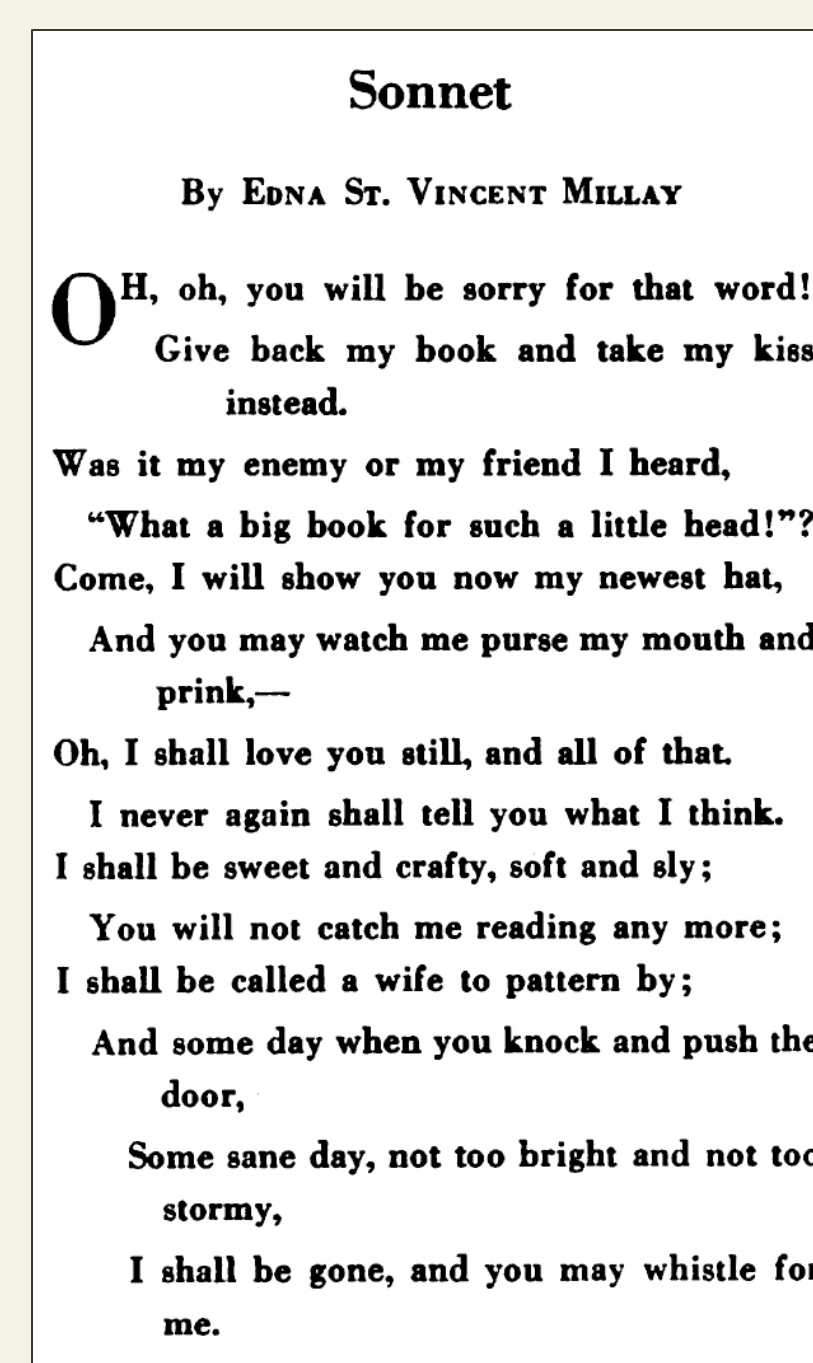
Edmund Wilson helped Millay land this feature in the November 1920 issue of *Vanity Fair*. The publication catapulted Millay to national celebrity.



Genevieve Taggard helped to found *The Measure*, a "little" magazine dedicated to poetry, in 1921. Elinor Wylie and Louise Bogan also edited the journal prior to its demise in 1926.

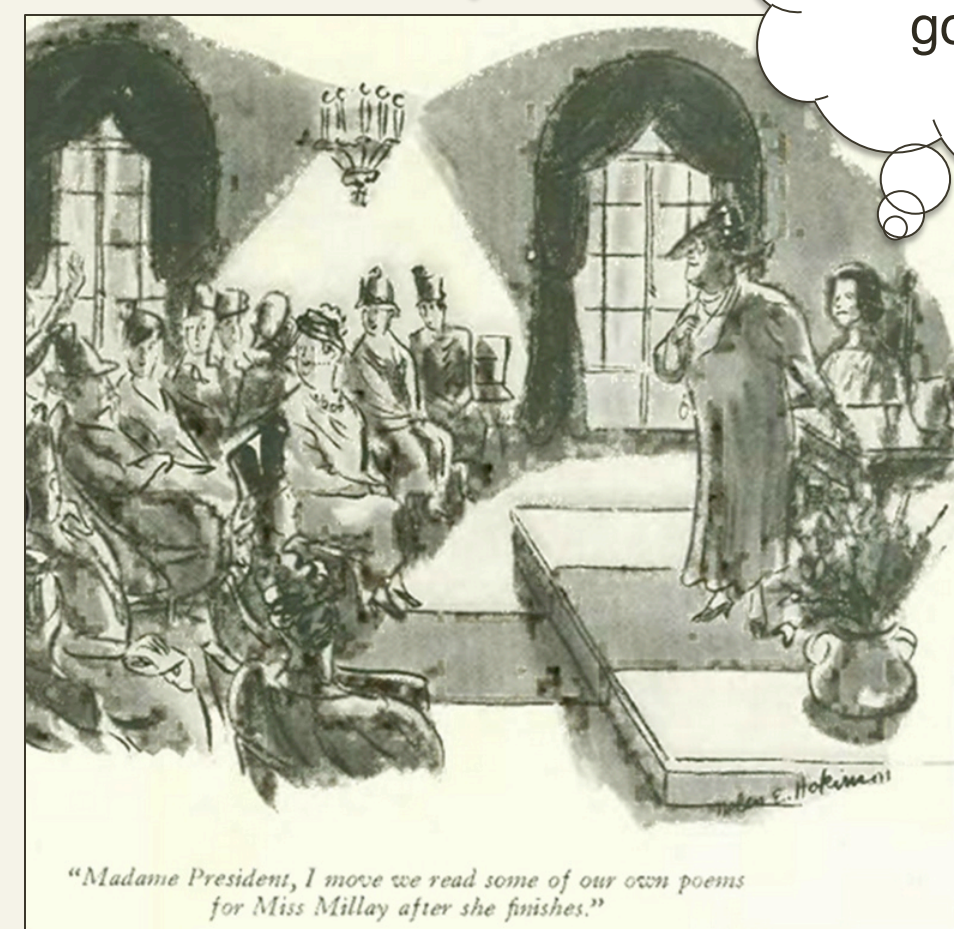
Beginning in the 1930s, these poets' reputations and the record of their historical achievements were altered fundamentally. A new generation of scholars, later known as the **New Critics**, came to prominence in the literary academy. **Cleanth Brooks**, **John Crowe Ransom**, and **Allen Tate** mocked Millay and her contemporaries as "simple" and "sentimental." heir criticism, which proved extremely destructive to women's poetry, also laid the foundation for a new discipline of literary studies.

BECOMING SENTIMENTAL



Vanity Fair 17.5 (April 1922): 70.

"Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it."
—John Crowe Ransom, "The Poet As Woman"



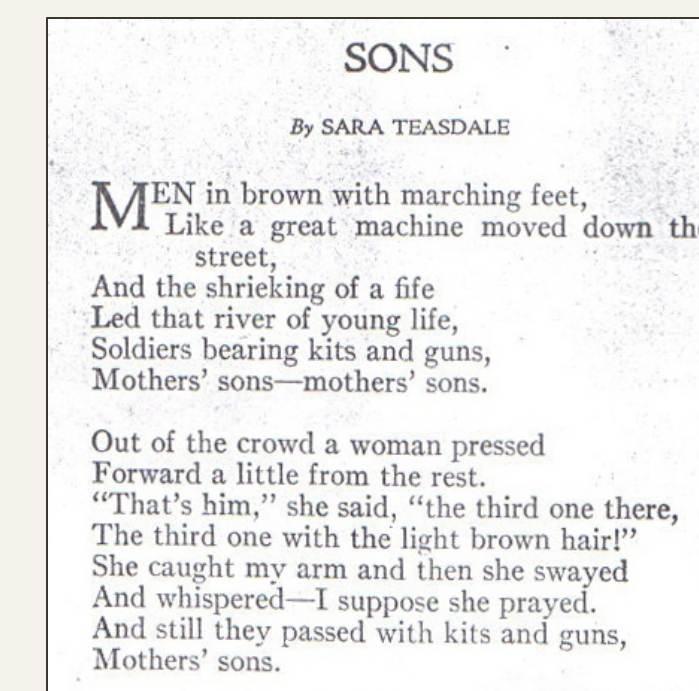
"Madame President, I move we read some of our own poems for Miss Millay after she has finished." Cartoon, Helen Hokinson, *New Yorker* 22 Aug. 1936: 26.

An ardent feminist, Millay fought for women's full social and political equality. Her intricate sonnets provide proof of women's intellectual capabilities.

"Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,
'What a big book for such a little head!'"
—Edna St. Vincent Millay,
"Oh, Oh, You Will Be Sorry for That Word!"

John Crowe Ransom attacked Millay's intellect —just like the husband in Millay's poem.

This 1936 cartoon from the *New Yorker* portrays Millay as a sentimental poetess. She is surrounded by **women** and being upstaged by **amateur** writers. The cartoon suggests that anyone can write as well as Millay. In reality, Millay was one of the most popular poets in America and a pioneer in broadcasting poetry on the radio. **Millay was no amateur.**



Sara Teasdale wrote more than **50 poems** criticizing America's entry into WWI.

Why have we forgotten these poems?

Sara Teasdale, "Sons," *Everybody's Magazine* (January 1918): 98.

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