“What Lips My Lips Have Kissed,” Remarked the Willing Mistress

Having lived four hundred years apart, Aphra Behn and Edna St. Vincent Millay, two prolific writers of their day, lived parallel lives and were not afraid to explore and write about the sexual exploitations between men and women. Two examples of this are Behn’s “The Willing Mistress,” a discussion of an illicit rendezvous, and Millay’s “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” a reminisce of past lovers; both poems are explicit and unapologetic about the sexual exploits of women. The two writers have a similar theme, message, and imagery to convey the sexual interactions between men and women while in the throes of passion or in remembrance of passions past. While some may assume these women wrote about this subject as a rebellion against the restraints placed upon women or women’s writings of a sexual nature, this may not have been the case. Given the sexual exploits these writers experienced in their own lives, these poems may very well be a direct result of their liaisons and sexual exploration between the writers and their lovers.

Aphra Behn lived in mid-to-late 1600’s. After becoming an adult she was a writer, a spy for King Charles II during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, and an actress of the stage. Her tales of sexual exploits seem to mirror her own experiences. Even though she was married to Johan Behn, she still took on lovers of both sexes; it is these exploits that may have served as her creative muse for her works. Similarly, Edna St. Vincent Millay lived from the late 1800’s to the mid 1900’s. After becoming an adult, Millay became a professional writer, and while she did not
work as a spy as Behn, she did live through several wars during her lifetime. Millay was known
for having several lovers of both sexes, and, after her marriage to Eugen Jan Boissevain, she
continued to engage her lovers. As with Behn, these exploits may have served as her muse for
her writings. Additionally, both women were criticized for the unapologetic and explicit
portrayals of women engaging in sexual exploits. Behn’s work was attacked as immoral by many
of her contemporaries. Similarly, Millay’s critics belittled her writings towards sexual discourse
and did not favor populist and feminist writings. Their society believed women did not enjoy
sex; therefore, any suggestion to the contrary was considered absurd and taboo. During Behn’s
time, her society believed that any pleasure derived from sex was sinful. Likewise, in Millay’s
age, sex was discouraged in behavior and thoughts. These women attempted to open the
collective minds of their society of the sexual freedom of women while creating a literary work
of art that their society could understand and enjoy.

Behn wrote “The Willing Mistress” in 1673 when she was thirty-three years old and in
the prime of her life. The characters appear to imply the youthfulness of age as they sneak off
away from the prying eyes of society to engage in their sexual desires with one another; one is
not left to guess at the nature of the female protagonist. As the title implies, the female
protagonist is the mistress to Amyntas and a willing participate: “His charming eyes no aid
required / To tell their softening tale” (17, 18). The entire poem implies a forbidden love, one in
which the two lovers must find “The place secured from human eyes” (5) and describes the
playfulness of the lovers as they begin to consummate their love: “And laid me gently on the
ground / Ah who can guess the rest?” (23, 24).

Much like Behn, Millay had a great deal of lovers of both sexes during her life. What is
most interesting is, unlike the character of her poem, Millay was twenty-eight years old when she
wrote “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why” in 1920. Her poem implies an older woman, perhaps a mistress, who is looking back upon her life and past lovers while being fully aware that her own time is slowly drawing to an end, unlike the very young and health writer of the poem. Millay’s female protagonist, possibly a mistress, looks back on her life while she thinks to herself, “I cannot say what loves have come and gone” (12). With this poem the implication is of a mistress who longs to remember the passions of her youth as she continues to think: “I have forgotten, and what arms have lain” (2). The character of the poem has no sense of regret of her past she muses, “I cannot say what loves have come and gone; / I only know that summer sang in me” (12, 13) implying that she longs for the days when she was surrounded by lovers; however, she expresses no regret for the loves of her past.

Nature is the visualization of choice in the “Willing Mistress.” It is not only a setting but a personification: “But when the winds that gently rise / Do kiss the yielding boughs” (7, 8). The imagery of her words simply appear to be describing the winds gently blowing and causing boughs to sway; however, the implication is a male lover gently kissing his willing mistress as she begins to heave in ecstasy of his kiss. Behn’s description of nature implies a secluded place where the two lovers can hide away; however, nature is likewise used to imply hiding away from society: “Amyntas led me to a grove / Where all the trees did shade us / The sun itself, though it had strove / It could not have betrayed us” (1 - 4). Behn seems to imply something more than just the wind, trees, and grass; it is human nature she is pointing out and how when two lovers come together, hidden away from all those who may spy upon them, the relationship between a man and a woman is perfectly natural.

In contrast, to the use of nature in “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” is used to show the progression of time: “Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree… / I
only know that summer sang in me” (9,13). The winter and summer are more than just seasons of the year. They imply the seasons in one’s life; the winter depicts old age and the coming of death while the summer is the prime of one’s life when all that life has to offer is within one’s grasp. Animals are used to convey the passage of time as well: “Nor know what birds have vanished one by one” (10) is more than the migratory calling of winter. The implication of the line is, once entered into the winter of one’s life, the birds, which represent lovers, are no longer to be found and are longed after. Millay’s poem was written after the First World War while she was still in the late spring of her life. It may imply more than just an older woman who looks back upon her life. It may very well imply the loss of lovers during the war while she looks back and tries to remember who they were and why they are gone. While nature describes scenery, progression of time, and a personification of lovers, it cannot be complete without sound.

“The Willing Mistress” has a lack of sounds in contrast to “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” which is full of references to sound. The inference made to the lack of sound in “The Willing Mistress” is due to the nature of the tryst between the lovers. Since they hide away in a grove, surrounded by nature to hide their tryst, they dare not make too much noise so as not to give away what they are doing. The character of the poem is in direct contrast to the life of the writer; Behn was not known to be overly diplomatic or coy, which is apparent in her writings, so while her characters try as best they may to be quiet, it is unlikely Behn herself would have been so restrained.

In “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” sounds are central to the thoughts of the character of the poem, for without the sounds, one would not know the loss that “Is full of ghosts tonight that tap and sigh” (4) that imply the sounds of unnamed lovers lost and the sounds of love they made whilst in her bed. While laying in this same bed, she continues to
think, “And in my heart stirs a quiet pain,” (6) implying the emptiness of loneliness, of loss, but no sorrow. Millay’s character is regretting her lost lovers but, not the lifestyle she lived and the loves when “summer sang in me” (13). Similarly to Behn, Millay was not known to muse in quiet about her past. Millay’s mother insisted that she speak her mind and be an independent thinker. Unlike the character of her poem, Millay does not appear to have given a second thought to the loves and lovers of her past; she was always ready and willing to take up the next man, or woman, as her new love. In fact, both poems deal with the passion of love and the sounds, both soft and loud, that fill the air in a hidden grove or that silently speak of lovers long forgotten.

Arguably, one could argue both poems deal with the passions of life from the same perspective but from different points in time which may reflect the writer’s personal lives four hundred years apart. In “The Willing Mistress” it is with the throes of passion and the heat of the moment “Which made me willing to receive / That which I dare not name” (15, 16) with obvious implications of what she was about to receive and why. The poem is full of passionate references and inferences from the “yielding boughs” to “begin to play” and the climax of “Ah who can guess the rest?” (24). Given her life as an actress and spy, it is possible the character of her poem reflects the personality of Behn. She was considered brash, witty, unapologetic, and passionate much like the character of her poem.

Similarly, Millay’s personality is described as outgoing, flirty, sensual, witty, and passionate; however, the character of her poem has no regret for the passions of her youth. She is aware that her passion has passed away. The character of “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why” attempts remembers her days of passion: “I have forgotten … what arms have lain / Under my head till morning…” (2, 3). Here the implications are that she knows of her days of passion; however, she cannot remember the names of her lovers. While knowing her days of
passion are coming to end, she thinks about how passions once sang to her as a song knowing that in “A little while, … in me sings no more” (14), implying she knows her time on this earth, or her love life, is nearly over, but, before she finally sleeps for the last time, she thinks back to a time when her heart sang with the passion of her youth and the lovers that satisfied her needs. While the character of her poem longs for the days when she had her loves and lovers all around her, Millay’s life was entirely different. Before her death, she was still surrounded by her lovers, some old and some new, who were eager to be with her. Her life implies that she would never have known what it would be like to think of lovers gone; she strived in her sexual exploits well into her late 50’s.

What good is passion without kisses? The two poems touch on kissing but in two different ways. In “The Willing Mistress,” kissing is implied to be foreplay of the two lovers: “A many kisses did he give / And I returned the same” (13, 14). This would imply that Behn considers the kiss a very sensual and very sexual expression between the two lovers. Kissing is mentioned twice in the poem; however, it is mentioned as “many kisses” in one line and “He did but kiss and clasp me round” (21) in another. Since the other acts of love are only hinted at, the implication of mentioning kisses is that they must have been less risqué to write about during Behn’s time, especially when one considers she writes “That which I dare not name” (24). Behn, perhaps, wanted to point out the passion involved in kissing and the sexual pleasure one can derive from it in the only manner she felt she could given the day and age she lived in.

In “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” Millay mentions kissing four times, twice in the title and twice in the opening line and then no more. This is not to underscore the power, passion, or sensuality of kissing. This is done, probably, to imply that the character had so many kisses, in so many different places, and for so many different reasons that
she cannot possibly remember them all or the feeling of ecstasy she once knew while being kissed. The character sits back and contemplates her lovers and their lips upon her body and tries to remember the times in which she was happy to be loved and to give love. One may infer the kisses must have been something special to be in the title and the first line; however, kissing, or any variation, is no longer mentioned or alluded to within the remaining lines of the poem. It may be safe to assume that kissing is no longer mentioned as the female protagonist no longer remembers all of the exact details of her tryst, including kisses after the opening line of the poem.

When one looks at the entirety of both works, the readers see a common and a distinctive theme emerge from the use of nature, sounds, nature, imagery, and names. The theme of “The Willing Mistress” implies young love not afraid to challenge the norms of society or to be caught up in the moment of passion. The use of verbiage and imagery implies a sense of excitement and a sense wonder as the lovers begin to explore every ounce of each other’s bodies. The overall feel of the poem seems to illicit a feeling of happiness, of the first time being in love, and of the first time actually loving another person. It is sensual and erotic as they play “A thousand amorous tricks, to pass / The heat of all the day” (11, 12). The poem implies the youthful pleasure of love in a grove, shielded away from society and able to be free from the prying of society.

Unlike “The Willing Mistress,” the overall theme of “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why” implies a sense of loss, of loneliness, and of the coming end. The implications in the use of verbiage and imagery of the poem paints a cold and dreary house with no lights or candles to fight back the shadows of the past; the air is filled with a tinge of winter’s frost that no amount of fire can thaw. The overall feel of the poem is one of depression as the
character of the poem sits in her dark room as if “Thus in winter stands the lonely tree” (9). Cold and lonely in her solitude, she listens to the sounds of the cold winter’s night outside. She thinks about her days of passions while hearing the voices of her lovers past and unable to remember who they were or the love shared between them. It implies the feeling of a coming death, of a recollection of one’s life and the attempts to remember what were the happiest moments of one’s youth.

Both poems deal with the same issue; however, one deals with it during the fiery passions of youth while the other deals with it in the cold and barren moments of old age. “The Willing Mistress” is the woman of “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why.” Both women have many lovers and do not regret the lives they have, both women were engaged in activities in which society said was unacceptable for a woman, and while it is obvious that Behn’s character is are happy with her life, one could argue that since Millay’s character does not regret her past, her life may have been happy as well. One sees these two women as one’s life is in the summer of life while the other’s life is in the winter of hers.

Even though the women in the poems reflect each other, is it fair to say the characters of Behn and Millay’s poem are a reflection of the writer’s lives? The parallels presented in this paper imply there is a very strong case to make that these women used their experiences to create character and situations that may have very well been a reflection of their own lives. What of the two writers themselves: can one argue that, apart from living almost four hundred years apart, the two women lived parallel lives? Again, the implications between the writer’s histories and their writing suggest that they did indeed live parallel lives and were very much alike in many aspects. Of the two poems, we are presented with two sides of the same coin. In “The Willing Mistress” we have a woman openly engaging in her sexual freedom unashamed of what her
society thinks of her, while in “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed, and Where, and Why,” we can arguably imply we have the same mistress in the twilight of her life, looking back on all of the loves of her past, and while she cannot remember the names of all her lovers, she does not feel ashamed of the path she has chosen in life. Her only regret is that she knows she will no longer be able to continue down the path.