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Society of Colonial Wars Scholarship Essay:

Anne Bradstreet

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**“Untill the heavens great revolution”:
Anne Bradstreet in 17th Century America**

Anne Bradstreet is commonly regarded as the first American poet. Her Puritan womanhood has been recognized simplistically, just like the poet Phyllis Wheatley’s identity as a black woman. “Here is a poet,” conventional authors would write, “who, despite being a woman in a sexist time, made a contribution to the early American canon.” This is an incomplete analysis. In truth, Bradstreet’s gender performed oppositional roles: as an obstacle to her literary success, but also as a reason to write. An analysis of Bradstreet requires the interpretation of the historical context of her work, and the proto-feminist themes in her poetry.

Even before Bradstreet emigrated from Northampton, England to Boston, Massachusetts, the structure of religious worship was changing. Literacy and cheaper printing techniques enabled families to read the Bible at home in addition to hearing three weekly sermons. In her book *Anne Bradstreet Revisited*, Rosamond Rosenmeier notes that, even as James I persecuted Puritan ministers, “[m]others in greater numbers could catechize their children and . . . review sermons” (18). As religion became entrenched in the “sphere” of maternal duties, women engaged in religious discourse at home, although they were still forbidden to speak in public. Gender roles were reinforced by sermons about “the battle of the sexes” (Rosenmeier 19). The victory of men in that battle was a foregone conclusion.

Bradstreet’s feminist poem, “In honor of Queen Elizabeth,” penned in 1643, must have shocked her fellow Puritans in Boston. The poet openly praises the late queen for

proving the abilities of women:

She hath wiped off th'aspersion of her Sex
 That women wisdom lack to play the Rex . . .
 Let such as say our sex is void of reason,
 Know 'tis a slander now, but once was treason (*The Complete Works of
 Anne Bradstreet*, 159)

Bradstreet places the queen in a framework of strong women, including Cleopatra and Dido. By contextualizing Elizabeth, Bradstreet demonstrates that female rule is not an anomaly; it is an interrupted yet powerful tradition.

A simultaneously imitative and creative writer, Bradstreet borrows a celestial motif, but uses it in a fresh context. Wendy Martin, the author of *American Triptych*, writes,

“Cotton Mather’s use of the sun as an emblem [of Christianity] . . .
 indicates that no mere mortal governed the universe: ‘. . . No, ’tis our
 Lord Jesus Christ, worshipped according to the rules of our blessed
 gospel, who is the sun of righteousness” (41).

The sun had also been the symbol of the French King Louis XIV. In the elegy, Bradstreet upends traditionally masculine systems of symbolism, allowing Elizabeth to “embody the sun’s power” (Martin 41). The poet also uses the celestial motif to lend a prophetic tone to the elegy’s last verses: “No more shall rise or set such glorious Sun,/Untill the heavens great revolution:/If then new things, their old form must retain” (*Works*, 159). In her choice of the word “revolution,” Bradstreet toys with double meanings. A revolution is a violent coup d’etat, but it can also mean a cyclical change, as

in the revolution of the sun and stars. According to Martin and Rosenmeier, Bradstreet implies the latter definition, suggesting that the next great woman's rise to power is destined, though delayed.

Bradstreet's "Dialogue between Old England and New" was written in 1642, a year before the elegy. The poem takes the form of a family discourse in which England is personified as the mother, while New England plays the daughter. Ailing England complains to her daughter about the personal suffering and economic damage caused by the English Civil War (*Works*, 143). In the same breath, Old England admits that the Civil War came to pass because "The Gospel is trod down, and hath no right; /Church offices are sold, and bought for gain/That Pope had hope, to find *Rome* here again." (*Works*, 143). Indeed, the concern some English people, such Bradstreet's family, had about the growing "papism" of the Anglican church served as a motive to immigrate to America. The poet cares about the persecution of her fellow Puritans in Anglican England, and this emotional investment is evident in New England's reply that suffering Puritans should be avenged with blood (*Works*, 146). The poet's criticisms of the Anglican church and her clear sympathies with persecuted Puritans make "Dialogue between Old England and New" a far more mainstream poem than the Elizabethan elegy. Such marked changes in writing are frequent in Bradstreet's oeuvre. As Rosenmeier relates, "Mutability is the most consistent and important characteristic of her art" (155). Bradstreet is a writer continuously in flux.

The battle between Roundheads and Cavaliers had constitutional as well as religious grounds. As Mother England explains,

. . . There's grown of late

'Twiſt King and Peeres a queſtion of ſtate
 Which is the chief, the law, or elſe the King,
 One ſaith he, the other no ſuch thing. (Works, 145)

The conflict between the king and Parliament over governmental power, as well as other internal affairs, ſo conſumed England's attention that New England experienced a period of ſalutary neglect. During this time, Americans began to develop new trade relationships with Continental countries, and began to develop their own identities as Americans, identities later crucial to the fomenting of revolution.

Bradstreet returns to feminist themes in her maſterful poem, "The Author to Her Book." Drawing on a metaphor written in *La Semaine* by du Bartas, the poet compares the creative proceſs to birthing and rearing a child. What diſtinguiſhes Bradstreet's figurative language from that of du Bartas is her plucky uſe of the firſt perſon, and her deſcription of the child as "ill-form'd" and a "rambling brat" (*Works* 177-178). Unlike du Bartas, Bradstreet has actually given birth in her lifetime. Identity politics, as well as humor, make "The Author to Her Book" one of Bradstreet's moſt enduring poems.

I was inſpired to write this eſſay by one of my history teachers in elementary ſchool. It was late September, and I remember reading two poems by Bradstreet and diſcuſſing how wonderful ſhe ſounded. My teacher ſaid that Bradstreet was a loving perſon, a devoted wife and mother. I did not learn that ſhe was a feminist until ſummers later, and I did not learn that one perſon could ſtraddle both identities until ſummers later ſtill. History, I have heard ſaid, is the final fiction.

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