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English 222

5 February 2010

A Puritan Pioneer: A Critical Introduction to the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet is not your typical Puritan poet. First of all, she is a woman, which sets her apart from her artistic contemporaries right away. However, she also sets herself apart through the variety of topics she covers through her works, including parenting, religion, death, nature, and personal experience. Through all of her work, Bradstreet is able to express her meaning through different styles, something unique to her work as compared to her contemporaries. Specifically in her works “The Prologue,” “The Author to Her Book,” “Contemplations,” and “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House,” Bradstreet discusses both religious and secular topics, while simultaneously exploring a range of stylistic devices such as metrical experimentation and natural and down-to-earth imagery, to bring a more personal, human voice to her works.

Bradstreet is not a typical Puritan poet in the sense that her works are not exclusively religious in nature. For example, in her work “Prologue,” Bradstreet does not discuss God, but instead the position of women authors within Puritan society: “A poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong/ For such despite they cast on female wits/ If what I do prove well, it won’t advance/ They’ll say it’s stol’n or else it was by chance” (27-30). In this work, Bradstreet does not refer to her lack of “rhet’ric” (13) as punishment from God for sins as some other Puritan authors might, but instead draws upon references to classical literature to prove that women play a large role in the arts: “Else of our sex, why feigned they those nine/ And poesy made Calliope’s own child/

So ‘mongst the rest they placed the arts divine” (32-34). The tongue-in-cheek argument presented by Bradstreet in “Prologue” is evidence of the very personal investment she put into her work, as she wrote the piece in defense of her own career and in justification of her position as a poet in a patriarchal society.

Another example of Bradstreet’s writing about secular yet personal topics can be seen in the work “The Author to her Book.” In this piece, Bradstreet melds together her oft-used poetic elements: personal experiences, use of “I,” and down-to-earth images. In “Author,” Bradstreet is describing the first version of a published book of her poetry and her attempted revisions to the manuscript. To describe the experience, Bradstreet employs a childbirth metaphor, with the book of poetry described as an ugly, deformed child that Bradstreet gives birth to: “Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain/ Who after birth did by my side remain” (1-2). Bradstreet continues the metaphor as she describes the revisions she tries to make to the poems for a second edition of her book:

I washed thy face, but more defects I saw
 And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw
 I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet
 Yet still thou run’st with more hobbling than is meet
 In better dress to trim thee was my mind
 But ‘nought save homespun cloth I’ th’ house I find (13-18)

Here “feet” (15) refers to the rhythm of the poem, and “better dress” (17) means Bradstreet’s attempt to use higher diction but her eventual return to “homespun cloth” (18), or the original, simple language of the works. The discussion of the publication of her book, a personal

experience through a recognizable and common comparison such as childbirth, allows Bradstreet's readers to both relate to her feelings of frustration and see her humanity.

While Bradstreet wrote several works dealing with personal experiences, she also focused many of her poems, including "Contemplations" and "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House," on religious themes, allowing the reader to see both the impact of Puritan doctrine on Bradstreet's life, as well as her humanity. In "Contemplations," Bradstreet is contemplating the existence of God, particularly the existence of God within nature, a theme Bradstreet often focuses on. Within the poem, Bradstreet notes the beauty and wonder of nature as it relates to the glory of God, such as when Bradstreet hears crickets and grasshoppers chirping in stanza 9: "I heard the merry grasshopper then sing/ The black-clad cricket bear a second part/ They kept one tune and played on the same string [...] Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise/ And in their kind resound their Maker's praise" (57-59, 61-62). In this stanza, Bradstreet compares herself to the two insects, which are free to praise God however they wish, while she is "mute" (63) and cannot.

Another example of Bradstreet's finding evidence of God in nature can be seen in stanzas 24-27, where she observes the spawning of fish and the singing of birds, and notes that the elements of nature work together as one, with every animal doing what is instinctual and not knowing why: "Ye fish [...] In lakes and ponds you give you leave your numerous fry/ So nature taught you know not why/ You wat'ry folk that know not your felicity" (161, 165-167).

Likewise, Bradstreet explores her Puritan faith in the poem "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House." The poem moves in a cyclical pattern, with Bradstreet first accepting the destruction of her house in a fire as the will of God: "I blest His name that gave and took/ That laid my goods now in the dust [...] It was His own, it was not mine/ Far be it that

I should repine” (14-15, 17-18). However, as the poem progresses, Bradstreet moves away from her Puritan side as she laments the loss of her material items: “My sorrowing eyes aside did cast [...] Where oft I sat and long did lie [...] My pleasant things in ashes spy/ And them behold no more shall I” (22, 24, 27-28).

As she laments in the middle stanzas of the poem, Bradstreet combines the Puritan, religious tones of the work with the humanity that touches all of her works. This combination becomes increasingly evident towards the end of the poem, as Bradstreet finally comes to grips with the fire and accepts this personal tragedy as the will of God: “Adieu, Adieu all’s vanity [...] Yet by His gift is made thine own [...] Farewell my pelf, farewell my store/ The world no longer lets me love/ My hope and treasure lies above” (36, 50). These lines not only show her strong Puritan faith, but also reveal her humanity.

One element that joins together Bradstreet’s work of differing topics is her experimentation with meter and rhyme scheme. For example, each stanza of “Contemplations” has an ABABCCC rhyme scheme and follows a meter of iambic pentameter until the last line, when the meter switches to iambic hexameter. These poetic elements can be seen in stanza 1:

Some time now past in the autumnal tide
 When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed
 The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride
 Were gilded o’er by his rich golden head
 Their leaves and fruits seemed painted, but was true
 Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hue
 Rapt were my senses at this delectable view. (1-7)

Where “tide” (1) and “pride” (3) compose the A rhyme, “bed” (2) and “head” (4) make up the B rhyme, and “true” (5), “hue” (6), and “view” (7) compose the C rhyme. The extra iamb in the last line provides final emphasis to the stanza’s meaning.

However, Bradstreet does not stick to just one rhyme scheme and meter. In her works “The Author to her Book” and “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House,” Bradstreet writes in couplets, or rhyming pairs. Additionally, the two works are written in the same meter. Both “The Author to Her Book” and “Upon the Burning of Our House” are written in iambic pentameter, or five pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables per line.

Additionally, “The Prologue” is written in iambic pentameter but does not follow any of the previously discussed rhyme schemes. Instead, this piece follows an ABABCC rhyme scheme, as can be seen in the first stanza:

To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings
 Of cities founded, commonwealths begun, For my mean pen are too superior
 things
 Or how they all, or each their dates have run
 Let poets and historians set these forth
 My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth. (1-6)

Iambic pentameter is believed to be the closest poetic meter to human speech, so, when combined with a rhyme such as the one found in “The Prologue,” a natural rhythm is given to the work.

Anne Bradstreet not only crossed gender barriers by pursuing a career in poetry, but also broke the mold of Puritan poetry with her experimental style. By expressing both her pious Puritan side and emotional, human side through down-to-earth and natural imagery, Bradstreet

was able to connect with and relate to her readers, both past and present. By experimenting with style, Bradstreet was able to break away from other Puritan poets and express her ideas more fully.

Works Cited

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