

Kailee Harkins

English 434

Dr. Singer

Research Essay

Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book:"

Giving a Voice to the Oppressed by Voicing the Suppressed

In America during the seventeenth century, Puritanism was not just the religion that the Massachusetts Bay Colony practiced, but it was the basis for the community's social organization. This intertwining of religion and government played a significant role in not only who was delegated to be in charge, but also in the shaping of the perspective of those in leadership towards the people that they governed. Because the Puritan religion had such a negative view towards women, it led the colony into the formation of a patriarchal society that not only degraded women as human beings both spiritually and physically but also refused to recognize them as possible creators of literature. Anne Bradstreet's poem, "The Author to Her Book," not only serves as a historical and cultural landmark for this time period as it draws attention to Puritan ideas about women, but it also acts as a counterargument to the misogynistic opinions of her patriarchal society as it displays the full capabilities of women both physically and in literature. This paper analyzes the way that Anne Bradstreet's poem functions, specifically around the idea of female production, the body, and authorship.

This paper will begin with the examination of the Puritan beliefs about women that played a role in the shaping of the colony's attitude towards females, and will then be followed

by the analysis of the lines that Anne Bradstreet uses in her poem, "The Author to Her Book," to shed light on the misogynistic tendencies of these beliefs. Similar to how the organization of the society was based on the spiritual beliefs and convictions of the Puritan religion, the perspective that men had towards women during this time had a spiritual root as well. The Puritan community's thoughts about the female race stemmed from the biblical event of the fall of man where the first woman fell into temptation. As a result of this event, it was believed that a woman's earthly ties were stronger than a man's ties to this world thus making man closer to God. This is why all persons appointed to power in the community were male, and because the church was the basis of the colony's social organization, this meant that the majority of the community's leaders were ministers. This is important to note because at this time ministers doubled as doctors, and in her article titled, "Negotiating Theology and Gynecology: Anne Bradstreet's Representations of the Female Body," Jean Lutes states "the lines between folk belief, religious ritual, and scientific endeavor were far from impermeable" (314). Between the two practices there was a connection made between the spiritual and physical weakness of a woman. Because the pain of childbirth was believed to be one of the punishments of God given to Eve in the Bible, Puritans "[attributed] not only all female health problems but all health problems in general to the womb" (317). This meant that each organ of the body was affected by the uterus, including the brain. If a women were to have any disturbed thoughts, or if she acted in an odd behavior, it was because of the physically diseased and spiritually cursed womb that was within her. This theory not only resulted in the reduction of a woman's role in the Puritan society solely to the reproduction of offspring, but it also affected how both the society and women themselves viewed what they produced both physically and mentally. Bradstreet's poem does echo Lute's theory in showing the connection between the uterus and the brain, but at the same

time, it redeems the role of a woman as child bearer from being viewed as an act of demotion to an act of bravery and power.

Susan Friedman also comments on Biblical reproduction and production in her article, "Creativity and The Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," explaining that the Bible "has provided divine authority for the sexual division of labor" (53). Friedman elaborates on the labor of both Adam and Eve by explaining that "Adam's labor is to produce the goods of society . . . [and] Eve's labor is to reproduce the species in pain and subservience to Adam" (53). Combining what they believe to be true about a woman's womb with this biblical information about the sexual division of labor, Puritans began to exclude women from the act of conception. The cursed body of a female could not produce anything new. It could only reproduce that which was created by the sterile body of a man. Since the female body could not create anything physically, and the womb was connected to the brain, the male portion of the Puritan community did not believe that a woman's brain could produce new ideas.

And even when the thought of a woman being able to produce both children and ideas was considered, there was still a concern about the quality of the child or work to which she possibly could produce. Ben Barker-Benfield includes in his article, "Anne Hutchinson and the Puritan Attitude toward Women," John Winthrop's definition of what a woman could produce. Winthrop believed that a woman's mind was only filled with "monstrous opinions," and since her organs were connected, whatever she birthed would reflect these disturbed thoughts (Barker-Benfield 81). Because all of these theories were based upon religious texts and spiritual convictions, these theories about the female body became the truth to the people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. However, even though these beliefs were recognized amongst the

female community due to their own religious convictions, women were not unaware of how degrading these beliefs were towards them.

As noted in the opening of this paper, Anne Bradstreet uses her poem, “The Author to Her Book,” to counter the misogynistic tendencies of the Puritan beliefs about women which have been mentioned. One line that portrays her knowledge and attitude towards what her society believes about the female body and its capabilities is line one of her poem which reads “[t]hou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain” (Bradstreet 236). She does not make her awareness and thoughts towards these Puritan beliefs known by including direct remarks to the beliefs of her patriarchal society, but rather conveys them through an image that reflects the very beliefs and theories that her community has imposed. She begins her poem with the pronoun “thou” which was used in informal situations or used by someone of a higher social class to show his or her authority over another person. Bradstreet’s use of this pronoun symbolizes the inferior position that her society has placed women. Bradstreet does include an offspring which negates the belief that women did not play an active role in creation, but she refers to the offspring as ill-formed. This “monstrous birth,” as referred to by Winthrop, could very well reflect man’s concern of the quality of the object which a woman could produce. Women were believed to be cursed, diseased, unfit for leadership and incapable of the production of thoughts. The ill-formed offspring could also be equivalent to what Bradstreet’s society defines as the female body. Bradstreet concludes the first line of her poem with the recognition of her “feeble brain.” As mentioned above, in the examination of the Puritan beliefs about women, females were seen as weak spiritually because of Eve’s punishment from God, and they were seen as weak physically because of the connection of the cursed uterus and the female brain. The ill-formed offspring that is created in line one could only come from the feeble brain of a woman. A

“monstrous birth” to reflect a female’s “monstrous opinions.” As Bradstreet expresses her knowledge and thoughts towards her society’s beliefs about women, she essentially makes her society aware that their own opinions are quite monstrous and highly demeaning.

In “The Author to Her Book,” Bradstreet does not simply expose the misogynistic tendencies of the beliefs of her society, but she reveals how these beliefs have affected her as a human being. The effects that a patriarchal society can have on a woman can be presented in a multitude of shapes and forms, but each of these forms are underneath an umbrella that is defined by Sandra Bartky in Brooks Bouson’s book, *Embodied Shame*, as a woman’s “pervasive affective attunement to the social environment” (qtd. in Bouson 2). This umbrella can also simply be, but not lightly, referred to as shame. Though the male ministers of Bradstreet’s community doubled as doctors, men were not present when a woman gave birth. Lutes gives some historical evidence to the birthing process during the seventeenth century, and she describes the occasion as a time “for female solidarity” (Lutes 323). Lutes continues with a description of the process by explaining how “[a]ttendants often darkened the birthing room with curtains and shut up apertures such as keyholes, creating a ‘lying-in’ chamber’ that physically and symbolically enclosed the mother” (323). This ritual was practiced not only because the birthing pains of a woman was linked to spiritual sin, which mean tried to separate themselves from, but also because men associated female gestation with what was unclean. In a culture where women’s natural bodily production is viewed with disgust, Bouson states that “women are conditioned to feel deep body shame and self-hatred and to view the uncontainable, uncontrollable female body with fear and loathing” (5). This shame that a woman feels about what her body has produced can be inferred in lines 2-7 of Bradstreet’s poem which read

Who after birth didst by my side remain, [t]ill snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true, [w]ho thee abroad, exposed to public view, [m]ade thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge, [w]here errors were not lessened (all may judge). At thy return my blushing was not small (Bradstreet 236).

This moment is what Nathanson in his article, "Timeable," calls "a moment of exposure, an uncovering that reveals aspects of the self of a peculiarly sensitive, intimate and vulnerable nature" (qtd. in Bouson 5). Just as if a man had entered the birthing place to witness what had been deemed as grotesque by society, Anne Bradstreet is able to mirror this moment of exposure with her reaction to the publication of her "book child" without her consent. There is not only a sense of fear in these lines because she knows that her work will be judged critically by male critics, but there is also a sense of embarrassment about what she has created because of how the beliefs of her community has shaped her own perspective of her creations. Along with the fear that her creation will be judged, Bradstreet also demonstrates the fear that a woman feels knowing that her creation will reflect who she is as a person. Bradstreet recognizes that her "book child" is her mirror image in lines ten through thirteen that read "[t]hy visage was so irksome in my sight; [y]et being mine own, at length affection would [t]hy blemishes amend, if so I could: I washed thy face, but more defects I saw" (Bradstreet 236). As Winthrop believed that "monstrous births" were connected to "monstrous opinions," Bradstreet, along with any other female writer, feared that a failed work would reflect her competence. While desperately trying to avoid the shame of an unsuccessful piece and a damaged reputation by their consistent effort to review and revise, many female authors instead developed anxiety.

The anxiety that female authors developed during the seventeenth century did not just stem from their efforts to prove their competence, but also from the male discourse that

entrapped them. During this time period, the author was a masculine subject, and he was inspired by a feminine muse. It was simply unconventional for a feminine subject to hold the place of poet. Bradstreet's effort to conform to these traditions can be inferred in lines fifteen and sixteen of her poem that read "I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, [y]et still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet" (236). These two lines demonstrate the pressure in which Bradstreet puts on herself to comply with this literary standard, her efforts being compared to the stretching of joints, and how this requirement is nearly impossible to meet for a woman writer. Though she stretches the joints of her book child, it still hobbles when it runs. This literary convention not only discouraged women from producing literature, but for those females who did choose to write, it caused them to feel that their creativity was being hindered, and that their identities were being masked by male traditions. By using the metaphor of childbirth, Anne Bradstreet is able to not only comply with the traditions of masculine discourse, but is also able to elevate the identity of a seventeenth century woman in a very creative way. Similar to how her male counterparts use the female physique as their muse, Bradstreet also uses the female body as her inspiration. However, instead of focusing on the physical attributes of a woman's body, Bradstreet utilizes and promotes the Puritan woman's role and identity of child bearer. As said in Carol Singly and Susan Sweeney's book, *Anxious Power*, Bradstreet is able to find a way to produce literature in a male discourse, and she also essentially "[liberates] her own body from the burden of other people's texts" (350). Her use of the childbirth metaphor does not just liberate the female body, however, it also liberates the metaphor itself from male discourse. As discussed earlier in this paper, there was a belief that women were not involved in the process of producing children or literature. There was a literary metaphor that supported this belief, and it was called the phallic pen which was the male version of the birthing metaphor. This caused Gilbert and Gubar to pose

a question that is recorded by Singley and Sweeney which asks “[i]f the pen is a metaphorical penis, then what is the site of female expression” (qtd. in Singly and Sweeney 3)? Bradstreet answers this question with her use of the female childbirth metaphor that serves as a representation of the female’s body capability of producing both life and literature. Just as the male society tried to separate women from the process of creation, this type of birthing metaphor excludes men by it being biologically impossible for a man to experience actual childbirth, and as Freidman notes, it exposes the fallacy of the male birthing metaphor because a “[m]an’s womblike mind and phallic pen are undeniably contrasting ideas of creativity” (Friedman 56). Bradstreet makes a point in her poem to emphasize the exclusion of men in the creation of her book which can be found in line twenty two, “[i]f for thy father asked, say thou hadst none” (Bradstreet 236). This line negates the Puritan belief that women were not involved in either the creation of children, or the production of new ideas. Though Anne Bradstreet does use her poem, “The Author to Her Book,” to counter the misogynistic beliefs her society, and to show how these beliefs affected her as a woman and author, she also uses this particular poem to demonstrate a woman’s capability to produce high quality literature. While accomplishing these goals, Bradstreet still sought after an even greater purpose. In lines twenty three and twenty four of her poem, she writes “[a]nd for thy mother, she alas is poor, [w]hich caused her thus to send thee out the door” (236). Bradstreet is not addressing her own state for a second time, but she is now referencing the state of every female author that is being oppressed by the conventions of their patriarchal society. Because of her recognition of the female’s hardships and lack of opportunities, Bradstreet forces her work out the door despite the risks that she personally faces in an effort to encourage female writers and to ultimately establish a place for them in literature.

Similarly to how Bradstreet's poem addresses both the physical action and literary function of birth, Bradstreet faces both the physical risks of a mother, and the literary risks of a female author when she chooses to produce. In *The Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writings*, Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb state that "[i]f one defines a hero as someone who endures pain and risks death for a higher purpose, then a woman bearing a child might surely be classified as heroic" (142). Producing a child during the seventeenth century was not just a woman's role in the Puritan community, but it was an act of sacrifice made by a woman for the sake of her community. When bearing a child, a woman is presented with the possibilities of losing her child, maiming her body, or even losing her own life, but she disregards her own life for the survival of her community. These risks can be paralleled to the risks that Bradstreet encountered when trying to publish her work during this time period. She tries to amend her "book child" to the best of her ability, but she still warns her child "[i]n critic's hands beware thou dost not come" (Bradstreet 236). Bradstreet is aware that even though she has labored over this book, just like a mother carries a child for nine months and goes through the painful labor process, the book could still fail just like the newborn infant could die. Just as childbirth alters a woman's body, an author's work, specifically one that is not well received, can maim the author's reputation. As noted, the chance of this happening was extremely high for a female writer because of the Puritan beliefs about a female's brain, but Bradstreet still chooses to produce a literary work despite this possible risk. Lastly, the damage to a woman's body during childbirth can be so severe that it leads to her mortality. The criticism and disrespect that Bradstreet could have received for her work, equivalent to the damage done to a woman's body during labor, could have ended the life of her career as an author. Despite these possibilities, Anne Bradstreet still chose to write not only in hopes that she would have her

own successful career in literature, but also so that other female authors could as well. Though having to endure the challenges of adhering to male traditions and having to overcome the fear of the possible risks that came with creating literature, Bradstreet was able to produce “The Author to Her Book” which is ironically made up of heroic couplets. These heroic couplets and these heroic actions would inherently open the door for future female authors and establish a literary subject specifically for women writers.

Along with birthing her “book child,” Bradstreet is also considered the mother of the female authors that have followed her and the birthing body in literature. Oppressed by the beliefs of their society and struggling with the anxieties of authorship, “[women] [writers] [felt] overwhelmed and excluded from the essentially male traditions of authorship and must, if [they] [are] to write at all, search for a female precursor, a poetic mother who can authorize a rebellion against patriarchal authority” (Sweet 152). Bradstreet did not authorize a rebellion, per say, but she did challenge the Puritan beliefs of her society which were the root of women’s exclusion from literature. Revealing the absurdness of her male counterparts’ perspective towards women, Bradstreet is able to break through the daunting wall that her society has built between females and literature. However, she does not stop there. Bradstreet not only makes a way for women writers in a male discourse, but she also provides a way for women to represent themselves in literature by the use of the childbirth metaphor. Tharp and MacCallum-Whitcomb add in their book that the “birthing body is beginning to emerge as legitimate subject of representation within the canon of American literature and theory” (Tharp and MacCallum-Whitcomb 141). Women are returning back to this method that first liberated them not just because of its nostalgia, but because it is still a way in which women can find strength and show power. They are able to freely create without the fear of losing their identity because this a role in which only women can

fill. However, still oppressed by a patriarchal society today, women continue to have this notion to prove that they can do exceptional things. Anne Bradstreet is able to remind women through “The Author to Her Book” that they not only can do so with their minds, but that they have already done so with their bodies.

Anne Bradstreet’s “The Author to Her Book” serves not only as a representation of the seventeenth century Puritan community, but also as a testimony of those who were oppressed by the Puritan beliefs that regulated the society. Believing that women were cursed by God, the male leaders of the colony presumed that females were diseased physically, declaring them unfit for physical and mental production. Bradstreet counters these misogynistic ideas in “The Author to Her Book” by displaying the full capabilities of the female body. She does not simply choose to write to demonstrate her competence, but she utilizes the biological process of childbirth to emphasize that she can produce both life and literature. By focusing on the female body, Bradstreet was able to work within the limitations of the male discourse without forfeiting her creativity or identity. As she liberates the metaphorical, female body from male texts, Bradstreet also frees the social, female body from the shame and anxiety that they have felt about themselves and their work due to their own patriarchal society. Because of the risks that Bradstreet took in the seventeenth century, today’s female authors can freely produce literature and are able to use the birthing body as a subject of inspiration and representation. By voicing the suppressed in “The Author to Her Book,” Anne Bradstreet gave a voice to the oppressed and still continues to do so today.

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