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# American Women in Poetic Portraits

American ideals have adapted to suit new values and moral questions as the nation has grown. Over time, these ideals determined whose voices were validated in addressing their respective contemporary cultures. Such shifts come with great diversity in accepted and discriminated figures. Despite this variety, there are notable similarities among certain writers, especially female poets. Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley, although living in separate consecutive centuries, are two eloquent examples of female poets providing educated and articulate commentary on sociocultural issues in their respective cultures.

Anne Bradstreet was a white Puritan wife and mother who lived from 1612 to 1672, with a life described in great detail in a biographical article on the *Poetry Foundation* website ("Anne Bradstreet"). Due to her family's participation in Elizabethan tradition, Bradstreet grew up in a home that encouraged female education; so although Bradstreet never attended a formal school, her father educated her ("Anne Bradstreet"). This provided her with thorough reading in both classical literature and Christian texts, including the Geneva Bible ("Anne Bradstreet").

One of Bradstreet's most intriguing poems is "The Author to Her Book," in which Bradstreet appears to respond to the publication of the second edition of *The Tenth Muse* (Levine 230). This piece is unique in particular for its self-deprecating language, Christian echoes, and secondhand hostility.

First, Bradstreet uses a significant amount of self-deprecating language when addressing the book in question within the poem. She diminishes herself by using terms such as "my feeble brain" and telling the book, "thy mother, she alas is poor" (Bradstreet lines 1, 23). This language

may illustrate Bradstreet's conflict in identity as a Puritan woman shaming herself for valuing her husband and children over God; however, it is more likely that this use of language is a swift defensive mechanism to protect Bradstreet from public ridicule.

The *Poetry Foundation* biographical article names John Woodbridge (Bradstreet's brother-in-law) and Reverend Benjamin Woodbridge (John Woodbridge's brother) as two of her supporters ("Anne Bradstreet"). While these two men praise Bradstreet's work, it is interesting to note how they choose to "protect" her:

> After praising the author's piety, courtesy, and diligence, [John Woodbridge] explains that she did not shirk her domestic responsibilities in order to write poetry. . . In order to defend her from attacks from reviewers at home and abroad who might be shocked by the impropriety of a female author, these encomiums of the poet stress that she is a virtuous woman. ("Anne Bradstreet")

The Woodbridge brothers' rush to defend Bradstreet by proclaiming her virtuosity shows that, despite her numerous Puritan analogies and consistent references to classical and biblical literature, Bradstreet is unable to prove her own stature as a virtuous woman. The claim to the title seems to lie in men's evaluation of her virtuosity, thereby stripping Bradstreet of her social autonomy. Bradstreet must be aware of this, as her self-deprecating language may be retitled as self-condemning—a safety measure to publicly scold any non-virtuous or bold ideas that may be presented in the poems that were published without her consent.

Bradstreet also explores Old Testament Christian themes by addressing her created book with contempt. While the Old Testament of the Christian bible does illustrate a loving and guiding God, it also includes examples of when that same God looked upon creation with regret. Bradstreet's sorrow upon seeing the folly in her book may be loosely compared to the Christian

God's remorse in the perversion of humanity in the flood narrative of Noah and the ark, or in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Bradstreet directly calls her book the "ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" and warns, "In critic's hands beware thou dost not come" (Bradstreet lines 1, 20). Furthermore, Bradstreet admits to trying to correct her book's mistakes, but to no avail; specifically, she washed the book's face, rubbed off a spot, stretched its joints, and tried collecting better dress to cover it (Bradstreet line 13-8).

Finally, Bradstreet's proverbial bite towards her book may be interpreted as secondhand hostility. It has already been established that in Bradstreet's time, she was already dealing with controversy and complaints about being a female writer. Due to this walking-on-eggshells reputation, Bradstreet may risk losing her entire writing career and social status—and forfeit her Puritan values—by publishing a public complaint against the people who published her work without her permission. So, instead of condemning the people who published her book, Bradstreet can swiftly scold the book itself.

Another female poet emerges as Phillis Wheatley joins the body of American literary personas from 1753 to 1784, the century after Bradstreet's lifetime, as explained in the *Poetry Foundation*'s biographical article on Wheatley ("Phillis Wheatley"). Contrary to Bradstreet, Wheatley was stolen and sold as a slave during her childhood; she was additionally sold at a lower price due to her sickness and weakness from travel ("Phillis Wheatley").

Wheatley experienced a stroke of luck when it came to her education. The *Poetry Foundation* writes:

> After discovering the girl's precociousness, the Wheatleys . . . did not entirely excuse Wheatley from her domestic duties but taught her to read and write. Soon she was immersed in the Bible, astronomy, geography, history, British literature (particularly John

> Milton and Alexander Pope), and the Greek and Latin classics of Virgil, Ovid, Terence, and Homer. ("Phillis Wheatley").

Wheatley's educational background appears frequently in her poetry. She is well known for using both classical themes and techniques within her work, along with frequent biblical references, especially to comment on slavery ("Phillis Wheatley").

This extensive education is one facet in Wheatley's most characteristic traits. Wheatley's poetry, as exhibited in "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c.", carries themes of classical references, Christian references, and patriotism to both evangelize in her Christian faith and promote the abolition of slavery.

Wheatley personifies Freedom, Tyrrany, and Fame as proverbial divine beings, directly declaring Freedom as a goddess (Wheatley lines 10-13). Tyrrany is posed as a divine rival who distorts Freedom's America. The very language that Wheatley uses is characteristic of Greek and Latin classics. She uses images of morning light—comparable to Homer's rosy-fingered Dawn—and a sad owl—a symbol commonly associated with the Greek goddess Athena—to illustrate her piece and set the stage for Freedom. These implicit references are a subtle and effective way for Wheatley to calmly and boldly advertise her education to other scholars, securing Wheatley a seat in the academic discussion.

Wheatley also exercises a significant amount of biblical references in her overall work. Within "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" specifically, Wheatley writes:

> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
>
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
>
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray

Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (Wheatley lines 28-31)

This section is quite clearly discussing slavery—specifically, Wheatley's personal experience; however, the language Wheatley uses mimics that used in the death of the firstborn Egyptian sons while Israel was in captivity, or that King David expressed while mourning the death of his first son with Bathsheba. Such use of language and similar themes to biblical texts demonstrates one of the ways Wheatley employs *pathos* and *ethos* to advocate for abolition in her writing.

Lastly, Wheatley expresses much patriotism in her writing. This does still hold true for her poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth." Within this text, Wheatley uses an abundance of patriotic terminology and imagery to convey her abolitionist ideas. These phrases include, but are not limited to, "Freedom's charms unfold" and "No longer shalt [America] dread the iron chain / Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand / Had mad, and with it meant t' enslave the land" (Wheatley 17-9). Wheatley's patriotic declarations not only express love, respect, and advocacy for America, but a rhetorical move to establish her identity as a rightful American citizen with a voice and something valuable to say.

Upon first glance, Bradstreet and Whitley appear to dominate two completely separate spheres in the realm of American female poets. Closer study reveals that both of these women used similar devices to fight for their rights as American citizens and to provide commentary on their respective contemporary American cultures. Additionally, Bradstreet and Wheatley both somewhat relied on assistance from others with more authority and acceptance in their societies to help establish and protect the groundwork for Bradstreet and Wheatley's writing.

It has already been stated that both Bradstreet and Wheatley use biblical references in their work. Bradstreet's identity as a female Christian poet helped to communicate her Puritan views of "suffering as a means of preparing the heart to receive God's grace" ("Anne

Bradstreet"). These references also helped to reinforce Bradstreet's identity as a virtuous woman, providing a rebuttal to the challenge presented by others' fears of her choosing to write poetry and neglecting her familial duties in the process ("Anne Bradstreet"). Wheatley, on the other hand, uses biblical references to cater to the institutional church, a highly effective and powerful play "to the most influential segment of 18th-century society" ("Phillis Wheatley"). As the *Poetry Foundation* confirms, Wheatley "often spoke in explicit biblical language designed to move church members to decisive action" ("Phillis Wheatley"). Thus, Bradstreet and Wheatley both exercise religious references as either defensive or offensive moves in social commentary that simultaneously define their citizenship.

Despite all of their intensive writing, Bradstreet and Wheatley were not capable of sustaining themselves within their own societies. This is not a detriment against Bradstreet or Wheatley; rather, this is an illumination on the unjust natures of society itself with respect to women, both black and white, although the lack of justice varies for either party.

Bradstreet had to rely on John Woodbridge and Reverend Benjamin Woodbridge, her brothers-in-law, to defend her identity as a virtuous woman ("Anne Bradstreet"). The Woodbridge brothers go so far as to write prefaces and other documents regarding Bradstreet's work to further ensure this security ("Anne Bradstreet"). Even with the help of male voices to support her case, Bradstreet's stance had to be reinforced with a great amount of stress on Bradstreet's virtuous identity. This is indicative of a society that may be caught up in either outdated or misunderstood tradition with little room for growth.

In order for Wheatley's writing to be published in the first place, one of her acquaintances had to contact an ally in London ("Phillis Wheatley"). Wheatley had great struggle in trying to get her work published in America, so London was her greatest chance at success ("Phillis

Wheatley"). This line of cultural defense also included figures such as the Earl of Dartmouth, Baron George Lyttleton, Sir Brook Watson, John Thorton, and Benjamin Franklin ("Phillis Wheatley"). Wheatley's struggle for publication and sustainability shows a society set in conflict that refuses to notice different races as equally human, and reinforces abuse of others based on skin color—to summarize, a society willfully implementing racism and slavery. It is also worth noting that, as a black woman in slavery, Wheatley did not have the privilege of relying on immediate family or friends to sustain her. She, unlike Bradstreet, did have to secure her connections to higher authority figures and abolitionists. This need for greater support shows the value and power dynamics that were instilled between black and white figures in Wheatley's day.

In conclusion, Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley share much in common, despite the different issues, social classes, and values their respective societies carried. Close reading reveals that a white Puritan woman in the 1600s has a lot to say in alignment with a black enslaved woman in the 1700s. While using slightly different, but related, tactics to defend or argue different types of points suitable for their societies, Bradstreet and Wheatley both exhibit a thorough display of their education, religious knowledge, and communication skills by providing poetic commentary on the sociocultural atmosphere around them.

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