Anne Bradstreet's "Marriage" Poems and the Condition of the Puritan Woman in Seventeenth-century America

Ovidiu MATIU

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts
E-mail: ovidiu.matiu@ulbsibiu.ro

Anne Bradstreet's "Marriage" Poems and the Condition of the Puritan Woman in Seventeenth-century America

Abstract: This paper analyzes some of Anne Bradstreet's "marriage" poems, in an attempt to show that the shift in her poetic voice, namely the turn to a more secular approach to poetry, makes her relevant today as the first published poet in America and the first American writer who struggled to establish a new literary paradigm in the New World. The poems "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," "To My Dear and Loving Husband," "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment", "Another" I and "Another" II represent a shift from the "nostalgia" of English literature and the establishment of a new, feminine poetic voice, preoccupied with the condition of the woman writer and the fate of poetry in the patriarchal seventeenth-century American society.
Keywords: Bradstreet, Puritanism, American literature, American poetry, "marriage" poems.

Citation suggestion: Matiu, Ovidiu. "Anne Bradstreet's 'Marriage' Poems and the Condition of the Puritan Woman in Seventeenth-century America." *Transilvania*, no. 11-12 (2023): 25-28.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2023.11-12.04

Labelled by John Harvard Ellis "the earliest poet of her sex in America," Anne Bradstreet (née Dudley, 1612-1672), actually the first published American poet, was born "probably" in Northampton (in 1612 or 1613), in the family of Thomas Dudley, the future governor of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay and, when she was 16 years of age, married Simon Bradstreet, a future governor of the same colony. Surprisingly, according to Ellis, "she had read and studied, with unusual diligence, for one of her age and sex" living in those times.[1] She had access and read all the new pieces published during her lifetime, but one of the texts that she took great pleasure in reading and that she used as source of inspiration for her own writing and spiritual meditations was the authorized text of the Holy Scripture, i.e. the King James Version printed in 1611 by the King's printer, Robert Barker. In her text, entitled "To my Dear Children," she confesses that ever since she was a young girl, she had found peace and guidance in the texts of the Bible:

> "In my young years, about 6 or 7 as I take it, I began to make conscience of my ways, and what I knew was sinful, as lying, disobedience to parents, etc., I avoided it. If at any time I was overtaken with the like evils, it was as a great trouble, and I could not be at rest 'till by prayer I had confessed it unto God. I was also troubled at the neglect of private duties though too often tardy that way. I also found much comfort in reading the Scriptures, especially those places I thought most concerned my condition, and as I grew to have more understanding, so the more solace I took in them."[2]

The Bible provided her with all the comfort she needed as a Puritan woman adhering to the Christian belief and way of life. Anne Bradstreet truly believed that poetry, "man's word, even in verse, could be used as a vehicle for God's truth," and this belief "[...] was, however, set in tension with other impulses and needs that helped make [her] poetry exceptionally vivid and dramatic. With Bradstreet, many of the impulses, and the tensions

they generated, sprang from the simple fact that she was a woman."[3] Deeply concerned with her condition as a girl, as an adolescent, and then as a young woman, Bradstreet was aware of the transformations that she had to undergo and drew closer to God in her attempt to cure her "carnall" heart, her vanity, her pride and even her physical weaknesses ("small pox"). Two years after she married Simon Bradstreet, she traveled to America, where she wrote her work, gave birth to her eight children, and fundamentally changed her "condition" – and that of the many women that benefited from her legacy – becoming the first American published poet.

Both her volumes were published without her knowledge. Her first volume, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, was printed in England (in London) in 1650 by her brother-in-law, and the second, revised edition, was published after her death, in 1678, in her new "Country," America (in Boston). An American Sappho, "The Poetess" of America used Elizabethan models and wrote in the tradition of outstanding Elizabethan writers, such as Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh, or Guillaume de Salluste, seigneur du Bartas, [4] not necessarily in praise of relevant male writers, but also in an attempt to undermine the established male models.

In her foreword to the volume *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, edited by Jeannine Hensley, Adrienne Rich argues that Bradstreet's "accidental" inauguration of her life as a poet with "The Humours," "The Ages of Man," "The Seasons," "The Elements," and "The Four Monarchies" (a historical poem about the Assyrian, Persian, Grecian, and Roman monarchies) seemed to have paved the way for her reception after centuries as "a social curiosity or at best a literary fossil" if she had stopped there.[5] Nevertheless, if we consider the historical, social, and cultural context of the time, her debut was indeed memorable.[6] And, moreover, she knew that she was not supposed to stop there. Rich cites the end of the "Quaternion" in support of her idea regarding Bradstreet's debut as a poet, "My subject's bare, my brain is bad, / Or better lines you should have had: / The first fell in so naturally, I knew not how to pass it by..."[7], but since humility was nothing out of the ordinary for a seventeenth-century Puritan (poet), this attitude could be interpreted as the expression of a poetic convention (embraced by Bradstreet), rather than the acknowledgment of her personal failure as a poet: "Only when Bradstreet is recognized as a seventeenth-century Puritan poet whose roots lie in the classical poetic tradition can her long formal public poems be properly evaluated. Within that tradition Bradstreet's apologies can be seen for what they really are: as creative applications of conventional and obligatory poetic formulae, and not as expressions of self-doubt or deprecations of her poetic abilities."[8]

While in the seventeenth century "Intellectual intensity among women gave cause for uneasiness," Bradstreet "appears to have written by way of escaping from the conditions of her experience, rather than as an expression of what she felt and knew."[9] Therefore, in her early works, she does not write about the American landscape, she does not write about her personal life, or too much about theology. As Rich rightfully observes, the "nostalgia for English culture" fueled her writing at the time.

Her later work, namely everything she wrote after 1650, is worth a thorough analysis and its recognition as valuable literature. After 1650, she left historical subjects behind and started focusing on her own life, on her family, on death, on sickness, on religious feelings, on the condition of the woman in the seventeenth century. A devout Christian, she embraced the Puritan values of marriage (procreation, protection from sin, mutual support) and she had eight children, four daughters and four sons, so it is not at all surprising that, her most valuable and memorable work, the work that makes her levitate from the archives and unveils her significance for the history of American literature is the one related to her family life. Bradstreet's "marriage", domestic poems, even though they do not totally exclude the supernatural, are essentially secular poems focusing on her longing for her husband and on the condition of the woman in seventeenth-century colonial America.

As Adrienne Rich argues in her "Foreword," a poem about childbirth in the seventeenth century, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," displays "[t]he delicacy and reticence of her expression at its best."[10] Bradstreet wrote this epistolary poem – as well as the other "marriage" poems discussed below – in the traditional form of seventeenth-century English poetry she knew well, in heroic couplets (pairs of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter), in an attempt to place her work within that literary tradition and add weight to her work. Nevertheless, what actually gave weight to her work and makes it recognizable today is her focus on themes related to her private life and the condition of the woman in colonial America.

Obviously, given the context, a seventeenth-century poem about childbirth might be read today as a historical document in search for language peculiarities and accurate information derived from first-hand experience with the phenomenon, but Bradstreet's lines are more than that. First of all, the poem is written from the perspective of a pregnant woman fully aware of the risks involved by her giving birth to a child for both herself, the infant, her other children, and her husband. She defamiliarizes the subject of childbirth turning the poem into a "practical document, a little testament" indeed, as Rich describes it, but also into a meditation about death and immortality.

The poet writes a few (28) "farewell lines" to her husband, her "Dear" friend, acknowledging the fact that no friendship can escape death, the unavoidable divine "sentence," but that she hopes that the days that

she did not have the chance to spend on earth will be given by God to her husband and her "dear remains," her children. She also hopes that she will be remembered, her poem will be read again in loving memory ("kiss this paper for thy love's dear sake"), and that the husband will protect her children "from step-dame's injury."[11] The poem reads like a testament of a married woman who is aware of what her fate might be and who decides to leave her husband a love letter containing a list of practical instructions teaching him how to care for her children in the advent that she might lose her life in childbirth; in all Puritan humility, she admits that the husband might remarry and that his future wife might not be as good a mother to her children as she had been. She focuses on those around her, on their present and future, and less on her own desperate situation.

Written sometime between 1641 and 1643, and published posthumously in 1678, in the volume *Seven Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning, Full of Delight*, the poem titled "To My Dear and Loving Husband" continues Bradstreet's declaration of love to her husband, expressing the attitude of the Puritan wife to love, marriage and family. In this poem, shared love is a pathway to redemption and eternal life in Heaven: "Then while we live, in love let's so persevere / That when we live no more, we may live ever."[12] This eternal union in Heaven is announced from the first line ("If ever two were one, then surely we"), establishing from the very beginning that the two lovers, husband and wife, are united forever.

The repetition in the second line shows that their love is a constant of their earthly life, one that provides them with the harmony and richness material values are incapable of producing. The word "recompense", in the eighth line, does not rhyme with "quench", symbolizing the great divide between the material and spiritual values, i.e. love, which can never be matched. Bradstreet addresses both her husband to whom he declares her love, but also the other women in the world ("ye women"), proclaiming the value of love in general and the value of her love for her husband in particular. Her husband's love is equally valuable and thus can never be repaid: "Thy love is such I can no way repay"; this line is linked to the seventh line through the phrase "My love is such" showing that love matches love only, not the riches of the world. In other words, the poet refers to fulfilled love as the greatest richness in the world and the only one able to open the path towards eternal life: "Then while we live, in love let's so persevere / That when we live no more, we may live ever."[13]

Bradstreet's epistolary poem entitled "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Public Employment" is another intimate piece, which was probably meant – as her other "marriage" poems – to be read by her husband only. A Puritan wife living in the seventeenth century would not have referred to her sexuality when speaking about childbearing, but Bradstreet's display of her sexuality is a sign of a personal approach to poetry she viewed as a private affair, but also as a field in which thematic innovation might bear fruit and help develop the craft: "In this dead time, alas, what can I more / Than view those fruits which through thy heat I bore?"[14] Metaphorically, the husband is the "Sun," the "sweet Sol" on the poet's sky, to whom she dedicates all her mind, soul, attention and her entire life. The zodiac signs link the poem to the Quaternions, especially "The Four Seasons", but here they symbolize the cycle of the poet's life connected to that of the seasons. Her "chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn" because it is winter, but also because her husband is away. As with other poems by Bradstreet, the last lines show more optimism, "Flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone, / I here, thou there, yet both but one," but also a shift in form, which helps hold the simple, epistolary form together (the last two lines do not rhyme and are tetrameters).

The two "Another" poems follow the same thematic pattern expressing the poet's longing for her husband and her sexual desire for him. In the first "Another", the poet addresses the bright one, Phoebus, whom she asks to end the day soon, to make room for the night which more properly accommodates sorrow, "[t]he silent night's the fittest time to moan."[15] The source of the poet's grief is the long absence of her husband, which might cause the whole world to collapse under the "torrent" of her tears. In the second "Another", the poet compares herself to a hind looking for her captive "mate" "through the woods," and as she is unable to set him free, nor live without him, throws herself on the shore to die beside him. However, the poet is unable to start looking for her husband, ("But worst of all, to him can't steer my course / I here, he there, alas, both kept by force"[16]), but she expresses her hope that he will return and be with her "till death divide." Therefore, "Another" poems, before anything, are celebrations of romantic love, occasioned by the poet's grief caused by the absence of her husband. Even though there are references to death, prayer, God, they belong to Bradstreet's set of secular poems focusing on themes such as sexual desire, earthly love, and the condition of the woman in the seventeenth century.

Even though it is very hard to disconnect a Puritan poet such as Anne Bradstreet from her strong belief, the choice at hand being to interpret everything in the key of Christian symbolism with references to the Biblical text, the "marriage" poems show a shift in the poet's interest from the supernatural to the "carnall," form the sacred to the profane, from the extramundane to the mundane, abounding with references to the body and sexual desire. Erotic language is not totally excluded by Puritans, who often referred to the *Song of Solomon* in this respect, but "Anne Bradstreet's longing for her Bridegroom revealed the sexualized character of the believer's relationship with God—heterosexual, even marital sexuality—but unarguably sexual."[17] The image of Christ Himself "comes into a curiously complex and personal use," and other

elements (for example, "house" and "Sun," in "A Letter to Her Husband...") are nothing else but "pre-figurative images of Christ", which "read typologically, lead us into some unexpected complexities of meaning."[18]

In brief, Bradstreet's "marriage" poems become more secular than her other works, showing the imperfection of the physical world, of poetry itself, which enables the Puritan poet to follow the path towards total acceptance of God as the ultimate goal. This group of poems are the ones that make Bradstreet famous today, along with her idea about what it means to be a woman and a poet, which brings her to the top of the list of other writers "obsessed" with the concept, such as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Nikki Giovanni, Adrienne Rich, or Molly Peacock.[19] Her two roles cannot be separated, since they concurred in making her fight for both the establishment of the role of the woman in the society of her time, but also for the authenticity of seventeenth-century American poetry; she was does concerned "with issues that belong as much to a first-generation poet in the New World as to a woman poet; or, rather, the two roles are psychologically equivalent in a sufficient number of ways to make it useful to examine them as one, making Bradstreet not an anomaly but an inevitability in her setting and in her time."[20]

Note

1. John Harvard Ellis, ed., "Introduction," in *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*, 3rd ed. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), xi, xiv.
2. Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 241–42.
3. Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 44.
4. Ian Ousby, ed., *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*, Wordsworth Reference (Ware, Hertfordshire: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 111.
5. Adrienne Rich, "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry," in *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, by Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), xiii.
6. Ellis, "Introduction," xlii.
7. Rich, "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry," xiii.
8. Eileen Margerum, "Anne Bradstreet's Public Poetry and the Tradition of Humility," *Early American Literature* 17, no. 2 (1982): 159.
9. Rich, "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry," xiv.
10. Rich, xvii.
11. Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, 224.
12. Bradstreet, 225.
13. Bradstreet, 225.
14. Bradstreet, 226.
15. Bradstreet, 227.
16. Bradstreet, 229.
17. Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Puritan Women, Spiritual Power, and the Question of Sexuality," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 62.
18. Rosamund R. Rosenmeier, "'Divine Translation': A Contribution to the Study of Anne Bradstreet's Method in the Marriage Poems," *Early American Literature* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 125–26.
19. see Richard Gray, *A History of American Poetry* (Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 24.
20. Rosenmeier, "'Divine Translation': A Contribution to the Study of Anne Bradstreet's Method in the Marriage Poems," 19.

Bibliography

Bradstreet, Anne. *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*. Edited by Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Ellis, John Harvard, ed. "Introduction." In *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*, 3rd ed., xi–lxxi. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962.

Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Gray, Richard. *A History of American Poetry*. Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

Margerum, Eileen. "Anne Bradstreet's Public Poetry and the Tradition of Humility." *Early American Literature* 17, no. 2 (1982): 152–60.

Ousby, Ian, ed. *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. Wordsworth Reference. Ware, Hertfordshire: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Rich, Adrienne. "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry." In *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, by Anne Bradstreet, ix–xxi. edited by Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Rosenmeier, Rosamund R. "'Divine Translation': A Contribution to the Study of Anne Bradstreet's Method in the Marriage Poems." *Early American Literature* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 121–35.

Westerkamp, Marilyn J. "Puritan Women, Spiritual Power, and the Question of Sexuality." In *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, edited by Catherine A. Brekus, 51–72. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.