

# Healing the Fracture: How the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley initiated a Tide of Representation and Visibility in America

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Healing the Fracture: How the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley initiated a Tide of Representation and Visibility in America  
Madison Luken

In the inception of America's literary tradition many voices were stifled or restricted. The educated white male dominated the written world, creating a lopsided depiction of both experiences and values. For the writer who existed outside these constraints, an otherness must pervade their work and an inherent, if implicit, discussion of gender and race appears. Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan woman who sailed on John Winthrop's fleet to the new world, was one such writer who worked during the mid 1600s. Phillis Wheatley, an African American slave brought to Boston in 1761, was another poet who challenged the idea of what a writer should be, overcoming the restraints on both her gender and her race. In Bradstreet and Wheatley's poems "Upon the Burning of Our House" and "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c," respectively, their conflicts, both internal and external, burst forth surprisingly candidly. These texts amalgamate in their declaration that their individual existence as writers is a form of resistance to normative ideals set forth by an oppressive society.

The religions of both these women are integrated deeply into their writing and their lives. In early America, religion was almost a necessity for survival. In the face of hardship created by natural causes and the pressure to create a budding nation, many used religion as a crutch or a foundation on which to build their lives. Bradstreet and Wheatley were no different. For Wheatley, the importance of religion is inextricably tied with the importance of education. In fact, she argues that religion and education are some of, if not the most, valuable and liberating possessions. In the inception of "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth..." Wheatley claims "Fair Freedom rose New England to adorn" (2) and concludes the poem

praising God and looking forward to time in the “ethereal plain” (41). These two lines sandwich a blunt discussion of being taken from her homeland, and therefore suggest a conflict between what she has come to learn as a Christian and the adversity she has faced. One of her greatest influences was Reverend George Whitefield, a minister preaching savior for all races and genders. With these ideas in mind, she must navigate a white patriarchal society while still believing she has a place in religion, questioning thus “can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?” (30-31). In this way, the poems of Wheatley and Bradstreet primarily take a form of reconciling otherness with religion. In Bradstreet’s poem, she struggles to find closure about the loss of her house and all that she owns, claiming she “blest His name that gave and took” while simultaneously expressing a deep and pervasive grief (14). Her “pleasant things in ashes lie” while Wheatley’s past life was ripped from her (27). They have both experienced the death of a past and of an identity, and must war with themselves to either accept or deny a religion that claims to give answers to their suffering.

A motif that has carried throughout history is this usage of poetry and creative expression to sort out problems. While Wheatley and Bradstreet faced questioning through a religious lens, they had to also navigate the isolation that came with being a woman, and an African American in Wheatley’s case, during this time of little support or recognition outside established, usually domestic, roles of women. For Bradstreet, as a Puritan woman, she was expected to have and raise children, to be obedient to her husband, and to exist without imposing upon male dominated roles. However, through writing, her existence transcended that established role of women. She writes that after her house was burned down “When by the ruins oft I past / My sorrowing eyes aside did cast” (21-22). She displays a deep emotional attachment to what she has lost, and while she is expected to carry on stolidly, she publicly questions where her comfort

should lie, either in religion or in the life she previously built for herself. Similarly, Wheatley tells that she “Was snatch’s from Afric’s fancied happy seat” (25) and consequently “Steeled was that soul and by no misery moved [...] / Such, such my case” (28-30). They both demonstrate the absurdity in reacting emotionlessly to that which they have lost, thus calling out the demands of their society to accept what is unfairly given to them. During this discussion, Wheatley also breaks out of the poetic structure she had been using up until this stanza. This is a small form of resistance that is emotional and poignant and juxtaposes most of her other poems, which are almost entirely preoccupied with praising God. These little rebellions, large for the time, speak to the levelling effect of coming to America. Upon entering the country, especially for Wheatley as she arrived much later than Bradstreet, the diction regarding freedom is difficult to ignore:

“Should you [...] / Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung, / Whence flow these wishes for the common good,” (20-22). A country that boasts of freedom must clash with its citizens who are less free than others, and force this questioning voice from Bradstreet and Wheatley. Both immigrants and those brought to America against their will forego their past government and way of living, allowing this rhetoric to reach each mind, stripped to a state of *tabula rasa* in this new and untested nation. This levelling must have taken place for everyone thrust into the first stage of the American experiment, inviting Wheatley and Bradstreet to speak out as a man would have without hesitation.

Both of these women’s texts however, were published with a preface from a man within their lives. Thus, their poems are not bereft of the expected censorship for the time. In Bradstreet’s “The Prologue”, she says daringly “Who says my hand a needle better fits, [...] / For such despite they cast of female wits” (24-26). This is explicitly a recognition of the backlash she will face for being a woman writer, thus she couples this resistance with self-

deprecation, claiming “My foolish, broken, blemished Muse so sings” (16). In Wheatley’s case, she is treated through her prefatory materials as someone to gawk at rather than take seriously. Thomas Jefferson states in his “Notes on the State of Virginia” that her work is entirely below a level of which he could criticize. And in her poem to the Earl of Dartmouth, she even says “For favors past, great Sir, our thanks are due” (32) directly after discussing the “iron chain” (16) her people must endure because of men like the one she is addressing. Both of these women, must therefore operate tentatively, so as not to overstep their public resistance and be silenced or discredited. Additionally, Wheatley acknowledges openly in many of her poems the gifts of religion and education that whites have given her. A difficult conflict occurs here, where these gifts are tainted with the oppression she has endured, while they also allow her to write. This only further buttresses the great struggle repressed classes felt during this time; they were caught between societal expectations and their emotions, between conformity and resistance.

However, as aforementioned, this written struggle, whether obtaining conclusions or not, gives an invaluable visibility to the existence of that struggle. In putting pen to paper, these women became what they could not see: a female writer and an African American writer. Therefore, even if the religious conflict of Bradstreet seems outdated or thematically irrelevant today, to undervalue these texts as historical beginnings would be a grave mistake. These women founded literary traditions for women and African American men and women. These texts commend one another on their defiance of the odds, on their fight to exist. Representation is one of the most important tools in overcoming ignorance and oppression. Today books, movies, shows, music, et cetera should all strive to continue the tradition that Bradstreet and Wheatley began. Society, as well as individuals, must champion the voices of all people equally, and help make visible those who are invisible. After that step is taken, an exponential growth of

representation will question the necessity of norms and racial or gender divisions. Existence is resistance, and visibility begins the work of extinguishing the destructive nature of a human experience fractured into classes, stereotypes, and tradition.

#### Works Cited

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