

The Poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley: A Reflection of the Societal Values of Colonial America

Early American life reflects a time period of discovery and new opportunities, freedom from religious persecution and a chance to create a government based on liberal values. However, this history has generally been told from the viewpoint of those in power, typically wealthy white males, overlooking those who were deemed inferior because of their gender or race.

Colonial life was very different depending on one's place in society. Both Anne Bradstreet, an elite Puritan immigrant of the 17th century, and Phillis Wheatley, an African slave educated by her upperclass owners during the time leading up to the Revolution, knew this all too well. Each of these women were known for adhering to the values of their respective positions in society regarding religion as well the status of their gender and race. While the circumstances of their lives and societies differed, they both understood what it was like to be considered inferior, regardless of their literary talents. Through poetry, each of these women showed an uncanny ability to both question her place in society while at the same time seeming to fit into the mold or framework of it. The poetry of Bradstreet and Wheatley, both of whom are known for their faithful adherence to societal values, actually calls attention to the unjust nature of their inferior positions in society.

Anne Dudley Bradstreet was born into an elite English family with considerable ties to

upperclass society. During her childhood she had access to private tutors as well as an expansive library, both of which afforded her educational opportunities that were unusual for women in the 17th century (Cowell 394). From an early age Bradstreet had been instilled not only with literary and educational values, but deep religious beliefs as well. Her family was part of a nonconformist group of Puritans that left England in 1630 to settle the Massachusetts Bay colony, leaving behind the oppression of the Church of England (Cowell 394). Before leaving England, Anne Dudley became the wife of Simon Bradstreet, a fellow nonconformist with whom she raised eight children in Massachusetts (Cowell 395). The focus of Bradstreet's daily life in Colonial America included taking care of her family, practicing her religion, and writing poetry.

However, women writers were not taken seriously during this time and were even regarded with suspicion. Bradstreet's work was initially circulated among her family, and eventually published in London at the insistence of her brother-in-law John Woodbridge (Cowell 395). However, Woodbridge included a self-written preface to Bradstreet's work that distinctly marked the societal standards of the 17th century regarding a woman's place. Addressing the reader, Woodbridge says that "the worst effect of his reading will be unbelief, which will make him question whether it be a woman's work, and ask, is it possible?" (Cowell 395). He goes on to confirm the authenticity of Bradstreet's work as well as her character. He also points out that this work did not take Bradstreet away from her obligations as a wife, mother, or woman of faith, but "are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments," (Cowell 395). The fact that Bradstreet appeared to fit into the framework of what was expected of women may have led to acceptance of her work by those who considered her inferior.

Although some of Bradstreet's poetry does reflect the conventions of her society, such as

family, love, and the Puritan faith she is known for writing about, much of her work is actually calling attention to the abilities of women (Cowell 395). Bradstreet seems to struggle between her “duty” to the societal standards of the time and her understanding of the unjust nature regarding the position of women, particularly in a literary sense. For example, in “The Prologue [To Her Book]” Bradstreet introduces herself by stating her inability to write about the “superior things” that dominated the literary field of the time, such as “of wars, of captains, and of kings,” (Bradstreet 396). In the second stanza, Bradstreet compares herself to Bartas, a french writer of religious epics, of whom she reads with “wond’ring eyes and envious heart,” (Bradstreet 396). Although she claims to “grudge the Muses” for bestowing unequal abilities on her compared to the man, she accepts it and will write according to her “simple...skill,” (Bradstreet 396).

Yet Bradstreet’s true feelings about the position of women seem to be expressed in the fifth stanza of “The Prologue,” in which she says she is “obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits,” (Bradstreet 397). However, she goes on to say that even if her work is good, it will never be accepted by society and that it is “vain...to wage war” against a situation that seems unchangeable (Bradstreet 397). Bradstreet seems to realize that she must play the part of the inferior woman in order to continue publishing her work.

It is interesting that many of Bradstreet’s poems do, in fact, account historical events that she claims she was not to be able handle in “The Prologue.” The poem “In Honour of...Queen Elizabeth,” which was written before “The Prologue,” not only describes the historical atmosphere of the monarch’s reign, but tells the stories of other strong women throughout history as well. Bradstreet writes that the story of Queen Elizabeth will “vindicate our [women’s] wrong,” and lead one to question the status and worth of women (Bradstreet 401).

However, in “The Author to Her Book,” which was written after the previous poems had been published, Bradstreet appears to be a bit self-conscious about the reception of her work. It seems she is questioning herself after her book had been “expos’d to public view,” (Bradstreet 402). Although her work does call attention to the unjustness of the inferior place of women in the 17th century, Bradstreet herself never seems to be able to reconcile this understanding with her “duty” to her family, religion, and other societal standards of the time.

Colonial America continued to take shape throughout the 17th century and into the 18th, eventually leading to the Declaration of Independence and Revolution that broke ties with the continued tyranny and oppression of England. Building a country from the ground up took a lot of work, and the colonists depended on the slave trade to accomplish the feat. While slavery was more common on southern plantations, many northerners owned slaves as well. The poetry of Phillis Wheatley, an African slave who was kidnapped when she was seven and sold into slavery in Boston, is an unusual example of poetry from the perspective of an American slave (Richards and Robinson 1239).

Like Bradstreet, Wheatley was known for deep her religious beliefs and other prominent values of the society she lived in, such as patriotism. After being brought to the colonies, she was purchased by Susanna Wheatley, an upperclass woman of an educated Christian family. During her childhood, Wheatley was treated more like an adopted daughter than a slave. She was tutored in English, Latin, and the Bible and began writing her own poetry only four years after arriving in Boston. Wheatley’s work was first published in a Rhode Island newspaper, making her the first African American to publish work in North America when she was about thirteen years old (Richards and Robinson 1238-39). However, her inferior status as a woman as

well as a slave did not allow her work to be accepted by mainstream society, regardless of how in-tune Wheatley seemed to be with the standards of it.

Wheatley's sensibilities about her position are evident in her poem "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," which greatly mirrors Bradstreet's "The Prologue" regarding envy for those who were in a "superior" position in society. Wheatley seems to adhere to and admit her inferior position, being from the "land of errors," (Wheatley 1249). She addresses the white males of the university in order to compel them to appreciate the privileges that come along with their place in society. It is interesting that Wheatley refers to their "privileges," as opposed to their "rights". This shows her understanding that it is society which imposes restrictions due to gender and race, not nature.

Wheatley addresses the differences between privileges and rights more explicitly in her "Letter to Ocom," in which she is responding to a letter from the Native American Christian Preacher. She writes that she agrees with her friend's opinion of African Americans, which she sees as a "highly reasonable...vindication of their natural rights," (Wheatley 1056). The influence of Enlightenment thought is evident in this letter in which Wheatley describes every human's natural "love of freedom." Wheatley goes on to note the irony resulting from comparing her desire of freedom from slavery with the colonists desire for freedom from British tyranny (Wheatley 1056).

However, like Bradstreet, Wheatley also expresses a bit of self-consciousness regarding her position of inferiority. In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley seems to adhere to the standards of society regarding Christianity and African Americans, claiming that it was "mercy" that brought her from her "*Pagan* land," (Richards and Robinson 1247). Wheatley

appears to be going through the same internal struggle as Bradstreet did before her: trying to reconcile her understanding of the unjustness of her place in the world with the standards and values of society she felt it was her “duty” to uphold.

Regardless of what the women intended with their poetry, the works of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley definitely calls attention to the inequality and inferior nature that encompassed their daily lives. While at the surface, each of these women seems to adhere to the standards of their societies, their voices regarding the truth about their unjust situations shows through in their poetry. Perhaps these meanings are more accessible to the modern reader than the reader of Colonial America, who probably saw both Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley as the inferior creatures they portrayed themselves to be in their poetry.

Works Cited

- Bradstreet, Anne. "The Prologue [To Her Book]," "In Honour of...Queen Elizabeth," and "The Author to Her Book." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. A. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. 396-402.
- Cowell, Pattie. "Anne Bradstreet." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. A. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. 394-95.
- Richards, Phillip M. and William H. Robinson. "Phillis Wheatley." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. A. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. 1238-40.
- Wheatley, Phillis. "Letter to Occom," "On Being Brought from Africa to America," and "To the University of Cambridge, In New England." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. A. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. 1056; 1247-50.

The Poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley: A Reflection of the Societal Values of Colonial America

Elizabeth Powell
June 4, 2007
Eng. 345
Paper 1