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Anne Bradstreet and the Seventeenth-Century Articulation of 'the Female Voice'

Susan Bruce

*Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.¹*

Anne Bradstreet's poetic legacy remains contested. Jeannine Hensley, Bradstreet's first modern editor, speculates doubtfully that Bradstreet's legacy

was unambiguously discovered only in John Berryman's 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' (xxxvi),² and Bradstreet's achievement – remaining in print for more than three centuries – has sometimes been ascribed to the fact that she was the first American published poet (and, quaintly, in this regard, a woman), rather than to her originality or aesthetic value. If, in other words, posterity has looked kindly on Bradstreet in the form of continuous republication of her work, critics have seemed sometimes to share Bradstreet's own assessment of the quality of her poetry. They have also been divided on the implications of her poetry for a history of gender, but as I argue below, understanding Bradstreet's place in this history entails some exploration of what it meant to speak 'as a woman' in the early modern period and of the question of what 'counts' as 'feminist' discourse.

'The Author to her Book' appeared in the second edition of Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse*. Her poems, so the story goes, were 'snatch'd by friends less wise than true' – that is, secretly taken in manuscript to Old England from New by her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, in 1650, and published without Bradstreet's knowledge, being returned to her, to her 'blushing' embarrassment, in book form. The first edition of *The Tenth Muse* consisted mainly of Bradstreet's public, political verse. Her much shorter, private, personal poems, whose content is the homely and emotional (rather than the classical, historical material of her longer works,) only saw print in posthumous editions of *The Tenth Muse*. Well might Bradstreet have warned her literary 'child' to beware the 'Criticks' hands'. Adrienne Rich, writing in 1967 in a foreword to Hensley's edition, shared Berryman's view of the 'public' poetry (this 'bald/ abstract didactic rime', as Berryman put it), criticizing its 'technical amateurishness', its failure to respond to the New England landscapes into which Bradstreet, as a young woman of about eighteen, had arrived from England in 1630, and its 'impersonality'. For Rich, these poems were 'long, rather listless pieces', composed in a nostalgic attempt to maintain intellectual contact with the values of the world Bradstreet had left behind; for her, what is valuable in Bradstreet is the domestic verse, written on such occasions as a husband's absence, a house fire, the death of a child or fears about impending childbirth (xiv–xv).

Rich was the most famous proponent of a critical story told about Bradstreet in the 1960s and 1970s, which mapped onto her work a kind of teleology, maintaining that, through extensive poetic practice with less 'successful' and less 'personal' poetry, Bradstreet eventually found her voice – an authentic, woman's voice – in the domestic poems. This position was challenged in 1988

by Timothy Sweet, who maintained that it is in the earlier elegies that we see a substantial interrogation of gender, not in the domestic poems at all, which for Sweet, lodge no challenges to dominant gender-based power relations, merely reproducing the gendered hierarchies which marked early modern domestic space. Reversing what had until then been the traditional understanding of Bradstreet and gender, Sweet argues that instead of a progression through largely undistinguished poetry to the eventual accession of a personal voice, the arc of Bradstreet's career, from a feminist point of view, ends in failure: in her 'surrender or retreat into hostile terrain'.³ To that claim, and to Bradstreet's domestic poetry, we will return later; here, however, it is important to note that Sweet's intervention ushered in a series of interpretations of the political poems that read them as far more attuned to questions of gender than Rich had allowed. For a woman, the act of publishing was itself a gendered act, an intrusion into a male sphere: to publish material such as *The Four Monarchies* (one of Bradstreet's quaternions, poems in four parts) or the *Dialogue between Old England and New* (her most extended consideration of the significance of a proto-American 'New World') was to publish on subjects about which few men believed a woman could have anything to say. These poems may appear arcane to many modern readers, but Susan Wiseman has shown that in Bradstreet's case, women's exclusion from the political arena produces a 'figurative, oblique, complex politics' rather than no politics at all.⁴ Catherine Grey, similarly, claims that educated, literate women in the seventeenth century had a complex relation to the public sphere,⁵ and both Wiseman and Grey have argued that the distinction made today between public and private, following a Habermasian account of the public sphere, maps uneasily onto the early modern period, where divisions between public and private were far more permeable than ours are today.

Nevertheless, with one notable exception, discussed below, the more obvious engagement with issues regarding women appears in Bradstreet's private, not her public, poetry. The critical argument over the nature of the gender politics in the domestic poetry raises questions germane not just to Bradstreet, but to the nature of feminism itself: what 'should' a feminist writer 'say', and what observations would deprive her of that label? There are unavoidable anachronisms in maintaining that anyone writing some 200 years before the word 'feminism' was coined would have self-defined in anything even approximating what we now understand as 'feminist'. Bradstreet certainly would not have done so and, as a good Puritan woman, subscribed to beliefs about order and propriety very different from

those that ostensibly obtain in today's western world. As we have seen, the voice that Bradstreet adopts is frequently a highly self-deprecating one: her poetry a 'rambling brat', with 'irksome' 'visage' and 'defects' and 'blemishes' which are the products of a 'feeble brain' (the latter a phrase that invokes the debates about whether women have access to reason which we see played out elsewhere in this collection by authors from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft). Many might agree with Sweet that a voice which constructs the female subject as 'defective' in its capacities is hardly a proto-feminist one, and that the way Bradstreet positions herself frequently seems to embrace, not challenge, the status prescribed for women by the patriarchal society of which she was a part. Thus, for instance, in 'To Her Most Honoured Father Thomas Dudley Esq.' she claims that she has neither 'strength nor skill' to produce poetry as excellent as her father's (p. 13, ll.9–10); that her verse, unlike his, is 'penned' by 'humble hand' (l.18); her 'ragged lines' (l.43) are 'poor' (l.31). Just as she models an appropriate modesty as poet, so as a daughter she emphasizes here and in 'To Her Father with Some Verses' (p. 252) the 'duty' underpinning the father-daughter relationship: her worth, if she has any, she owes her father (l.2); her 'bond' to him 'in force' (l.9). Bradstreet appears to epitomize the dutiful daughter; elsewhere, she apparently unambiguously embraces patriarchal paradigms of dutiful wife and loving mother. In her 'Epitaph on My Dear and Ever-Honoured Mother Mrs Dorothy Dudley', she describes her mother as 'worthy matron of unspotted life,/ A loving mother and obedient wife'; who ruled her servants 'wisely awful, but yet kind'; was 'religious in all her words and ways' and 'true instructor of her family' (p. 219). Some of the homilies in her *Meditations Divine and Moral* adopt a straightforwardly patriarchal model of authority, wherein familial and theological hierarchies shore each other up as 'a wise father will not lay a burden on a child ... which he knows is enough for one of twice of his strength', she observes, for instance, 'much less will our Heavenly Father ... lay such afflictions upon his weak children ... but according to the strength he will proportion the load' (p. 304).

This is hardly evidence of a proto-feminist moment. And yet, if much of Bradstreet's expressed sentiment appears uncritically to reproduce the hierarchies of her age, there are many instances that sit less easily with the portrait of a woman content to embrace her God-given inferiority to men. The most explicit of these appears in her elegy to Queen Elizabeth, the only poem where Bradstreet addresses patriarchal prescriptions directly,

and perhaps the only unambiguously 'feminist' moment in all Bradstreet's writings, although as we will later see, another kind of female solidarity may be communicated in her domestic verse. When she addresses patriarchal prescriptions directly, however, her poetic subject enables her to borrow an authority and voice quite different from those she normally adopts, and thence to articulate explicitly a perspective she elsewhere communicates only implicitly. That (borrowed?) authority licenses an energetic rebellion against the misogyny of her age. The poem's 'proem' (preamble) rehearses, briefly, the self-deprecatory avowal of insufficiency with which we are familiar ('mongst hundred hecatombs of roaring verse/ Mine bleating stands before thy royal hearse') (p. 209). Whatever she says in her 'proem' about her 'bleating' verse, however, it is clear that once she gets into her stride, she believes she has something worth saying. For Bradstreet, Elizabeth's glory derives from many things: her foreign victories (l.48), invincible ships (l.49) and wealth creation (l.47). Elizabeth is the greatest of queens: Bradstreet compares her to Cleopatra and Zenobya, deftly establishing a sense of many great queens, not just one. But most of all, Elizabeth is the greatest of monarchs, the vast majority of whom have been men.

Bradstreet utilizes the figure of Elizabeth as a riposte to all men who disparage women. All that has been written about Elizabeth before is lacking: the eminent histories of John Speed and William Camden cannot contain the glories of 'Eliza's' reign; even Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (after Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the most canonical of Renaissance poems, and in this respect the most 'roaring' of all 'roaring' verse) fails to match this matchless woman. Thus, Bradstreet pits her own 'bleating' verse against pre-eminent literary and historical writers; she extends this challenge first to 'doctors' (i.e. scholars: Elizabeth is herself 'argument enough to make [them] mute' (l.40)) and then to all men. 'Now say, have women worth? or have they none?' Bradstreet asks; 'or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?' Addressing all men, from the point of view of, implicitly, all women, Bradstreet not only berates them for their denial to women of the capacity for reason, but reconceptualizes that misogyny into an implicit crime against the state: 'Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long,' she says, 'But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong./ Let such as say our sex is void of reason/ Know 'tis a slander now, but once was treason' (ll.102-05).

Bradstreet concludes this poem with regret that Elizabeth is no longer ('but happy England, which had such a queen,/ Yea happy, happy, had those days still been' (ll.106-07)) and a promise that 'Eliza' will one day be reborn,

phoenix-like, to rule Albion once again. Some have therefore seen this elegy as a nostalgic poem, harking back to a Golden Age. But nostalgia is sentimental and regressive, whereas this poem focuses as much on the present and future as the past. Its conviction that Elizabeth is herself an argument against the 'wrong' done to women by 'masculines' transcends the sentimentality of nostalgia. And importantly, its sense that Elizabeth exemplifies female capability collapses the distance expected between speaking subject and monarch: Eliza (the diminutive is important for the familiar connection it suggests between speaker and subject) is for Bradstreet one of 'us'. This sense of a collective, a kind of sorority, both between all women and between poet and elegized monarch, is not nostalgic, but an unexpected and radical proto-feminist moment. 'If then new things their old forms shall retain/ Eliza shall rule Albion once again' (ll.114–15), Bradstreet concludes. She is explicit in yearning for a time when denying women reason will again be counted treason; the larger, utopian desire of her poem may be the wish for a world which can embrace again the possibility of female rule, the return of *an* Eliza, not necessarily *the* Eliza (which is something different from a nostalgic wish for the return of Elizabeth herself).

Such overtly proto-feminist lines in the domestic poetry are, however, rare. What, then, should we answer to Sweet's accusation that in that verse, Bradstreet 'surrenders' to patriarchal terrain? One could remark that Bradstreet's conviction that women should play a role in public as well as private spheres appears not just in the public poetry, but in the domestic too: her epitaph on her mother lists, among her mother's conventional virtues, 'the public meetings [that she] *ever* did frequent' (p. 218, l.16, italics mine). One could observe that in her preamble to her extraordinarily frank letter 'To my dear children', she takes it as read that her children will want to know what was in their 'living mother's mind', a rare conviction in the period (p. 262); or that in her 'Meditations' maternal models balance paternal ones, as in Meditation 39:

a prudent mother will not cloth her little child with a long and cumbersome garment; she easily foresees what events it is likely to produce ... falls and bruises, or ... worse. Much more will ... God proportion his dispensations according to the stature ... of the person He bestows them on.

(p. 304)

Or one could further explore Rich's contention that Bradstreet's domestic poetry has survived because, in the extraordinarily compassionate intimacy of her domestic verse, she communicates what must have been the perennial

experience for a large proportion of early modern women. Take, for instance, 'On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being but a Month, and One Day Old':

No sooner came, but gone, and fall'n asleep.
Acquaintance short, yet parting caused us weep;
Three flowers, two scarcely blown, the last i' th' bud,
Cropt by th' Almighty's hand; yet is He good.
With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute,
Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute,
With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,
Let's say He's merciful as well as just.
He will return and make up all our losses,
And smile again after our bitter crosses
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;
Among the blest in endless joys remain.

(p. 259)

Bradstreet's wrenching, aching sense of the struggle it takes to reconcile unbearable loss with orthodox belief is compelling: whether that loss is finally reconciled in the poem with a conviction of God's goodness is an open question, but that the baby's death and the grief of its parents is fundamentally important is not. Can communication of such experience be counted 'feminist'? If 'feminist' is a descriptor confined to the articulation of overt resistance to patriarchy, it cannot. But Bradstreet articulates so movingly the reality of early modern women's affection for their kin, both kin who are 'taken' and those who are left behind, to and for whom these poems are directed and intended to afford consolation, even if that consolation is in acknowledgement of the reality of grief as much as in certainty of God's redemptive goodness, and this, surely, is of enduring worth. It offers real evidence against the now-outdated claim that, child mortality being what it was, early modern mothers did not love their children as today's parents do; it is hard to imagine that those, like Lawrence Stone, who first articulated this argument, could have done so given the desperate sadness of some of these poems.⁶ Michael Breitweiser rightly observes that these poems are 'a public ... legitimation of the right and necessity of mourning' which escapes the sententiousness of Puritan orthodoxy.⁷ And in communicating so compellingly the emotional cost of an experience so fundamental to early modern women's lives, Bradstreet legitimates, both for them and for subsequent readers, not merely the reality, but the value, of that

experience and the emotions consequent on it. And this she achieves in many poems: her fears that she herself may die in childbirth are the subject of 'Before the Birth of One of Her Children'; 'To the Memory of My Dear Daughter-in-Law, Mrs. Mercy Bradstreet, Who Deceased' elegizes her daughter-in-law, who did (aged 28).

Bradstreet's insistent conviction that mourning has intrinsic, ineluctable worth is a quiet kind of feminism. She imbues the domestic – her 'homespun cloth' – with a value that is profound, writing about aspects of early modern women's experience in ways that quietly elicit the sense of a network of affective relations between women and their kin, both male and female, that has stood the test of time because she knows, as do we, that that experience matters. She articulates the value of maternal affection, and of the communication to others of domestic emotion. Moreover, her apologies for her voice and her denigration of the value of her own poetry are not merely dutiful articulations of the prejudices of her own time. '*Dubitatio*' – a rhetorical trope which expresses a feigned helplessness – would have been a tool with which Bradstreet, trained in classical rhetoric, would have been familiar: in her very espousal of the uncertain, halting voice in which patriarchy insists she must speak, she paradoxically finds a way of giving herself a voice. That disavowal of authority is a familiar trope for women authors of her day, and for many years afterwards: indeed, to this day we meet prescriptions that women should speak more hesitantly and quietly than men, should avoid too much directness and should model instead an appropriately 'female' uncertainty.⁸ In the very act of denying her capabilities, however, Bradstreet ends up by affirming them. Her purported lament at the exposure to public view of her 'hobbling' child is undermined by the facts that her friends, if unwise, are also 'true' and by the delighted affection that so clearly underlies the poem with which we began. Like Elizabeth I, who also (Bradstreet reminds us,) utilized at Tilbury a rhetoric of insufficiency to afford her a more powerful voice (the phrase most remembered from this, Elizabeth's most famous speech is 'I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King')⁹ Bradstreet sometimes paraded the deficiency of her gender. But, she did so, paradoxically, all the better to be heard.