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### Bradstreet and Wheatley:

#### A Discussion of Two Distinct American Women Poets from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries

##### 1. Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley

When one peruses an anthology of American literature from centuries past, it is not unusual to find that many of the writers represented are men. However, there were many notable female writers in America back then as well. This essay will discuss two American women poets who lived in two different centuries -- Anne Bradstreet in the 1600s and Phillis Wheatley in the 1700s -- and how the time periods they lived in and their backgrounds affected how their poetry was received.

While Bradstreet was born in England to a wealthy family who provided well for her, Wheatley was born in Africa and taken to Boston to work as a slave for a rich tailor. Despite their largely different circumstances, both Bradstreet and Wheatley were taught to read and write, and shared a significant interest in poetry: Bradstreet wrote poems for her father from a young age and Wheatley was strongly influenced by English poets such as John Milton. Both women were religious, although one was a Puritan and the other an enlightened Christian (Baym and Levine 207, 763). While the styles of Bradstreet and Wheatley differed, both found great success in the audiences of their time and wrote about similar topics, such as their religion and the people they looked up to -- Queen Elizabeth, in Bradstreet's case, and George Washington in Wheatley's. Although Bradstreet and Wheatley lived contrasting lives and were not contemporaries, their

many similarities, and yet different writing styles and audiences, makes for an interesting comparison between the two poets.

## 2. Biography of Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet was born in 1612 to Thomas Dudley, a well-to-do Puritan man who managed the Earl of Lincoln's country estate. Dudley greatly favored his daughter and Bradstreet received a better education than most other women (Baym and Levine 207). This was a period when it was thought that "a woman's social life, as well as her morality, could be endangered by too much learning," a belief particularly held by the Puritans (Balmuth 19). The Puritans believed that God created men intellectually superior to women, and were firmly against women being educated: "They were notoriously unsympathetic to women who defied God's plan for the sexes by conspicuous learning or reading" (Showalter 4). This made it all the more remarkable that Dudley provided Bradstreet with a good education.

From a young age, Bradstreet began writing poetry, initially intended for her father's reading pleasure. Her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, had a collection of her poetry published in England without Bradstreet's knowledge. This collection was called '*The Tenth Muse*' and became the first published poetry collection by someone living in America.

Although Bradstreet was of Puritan background, she did not seem to hold typical Puritan beliefs. Puritans believed that the existence of God was clear in both Scripture and nature; however, they believed that scripture revealed God "more completely" than nature (Bremer and Webster 405). Unusual for the time, Bradstreet doubted God's existence and was conflicted about the reliability of Scripture. Her belief in God did not come about solely because of her father's and husband's beliefs; instead, she needed confirmation that God truly existed. She found this confirmation in the beauty of the world around her (Baym and Levine 207).

In addition, Bradstreet's writing style deviated from the Puritan norm. The Bay Psalm Book, known as the "first book printed in English America," was a direct translation of the Psalms used by the Puritans. Editions of the Bay Psalm Book that contained additions and edits to the original text were heavily criticized for their alterations (Mather 6). Puritan writing before Bradstreet's time mainly consisted of journaling about personal spiritual journeys (Kelly). While Bradstreet did include spiritual aspects in her poetry, such as in her poem "Contemplations," a lot of her poetry is secular and focuses on topics other than pure spirituality. For example, her poem "To My Dear and Loving Husband" is a beautifully sentimental love poem written with great emotion for her husband; it does not exactly conform to the Puritan style of writing. In conservative Puritan thought, secularism was something to be afraid of, known as "infidelity" and considered a rejection of God's power and divinity (Stout). Bradstreet appeared to be a rebel within the religious group she was associated with. This means that not only was she a woman in the seventeenth century, a sickly person, and a new resident of America, but she also held different beliefs about her religion than the majority of Puritans. These factors may have led her to feel like something of an outcast despite her good social and economic status.

It is possible that writing poetry served as a means to express her true emotions, which might not have been as well-received had she voiced them in the presence of company. After all, she had not meant for her poetry to be published. In much of Bradstreet's writing, she documented her struggle with her belief in God. She wanted to leave a legacy for her children to let them know that it was okay to be unsure and that they should not accept things blindly but contemplate them (Porterfield 113). Bradstreet seemed to be a woman of strong character with a mind of her own, a nonconformist in a deeply religious group. However, her rebellious, liberal nature is not a complete surprise. Her father Dudley went against Puritan values to provide

Bradstreet with an education. Bradstreet seemed to have inherited his nature of one who would not conform to prescribed beliefs just for the sake of following the crowd.

In the interest of her poetry being published, Bradstreet received testimonials from eleven different men praising her character. Woodbridge, who had taken the poems to be published, wrote an introductory letter stating that the publication of the poems was not initiated by Bradstreet, that Bradstreet had truly written the poems, and that “she had neglected no housekeeping chore in their making” (Showalter 3). While these statements allowed Bradstreet’s poetry to be published, they also suggest what kind of world Bradstreet lived in. It was a time when talented women could not use their talents unless they were approved by men and done with the housework. However, it is impressive that Bradstreet’s work was so highly recommended to be published by men as it suggests these men supported her work as a writer.

Although Bradstreet’s poetry was not of typical Puritan style or standard, evidence suggests that her poetry was very popular in New England. One particular piece of evidence is that Bradstreet’s *The Tenth Muse* was “the only book of poetry in the library of Edward Taylor (the next generation’s distinguished poet) fifty or so years later”. The fact that Taylor owned a copy of Bradstreet’s book showed the longevity of her poetry, as well as how widespread it was as Taylor lived on the opposite end of New England to Bradstreet. In addition, historians believe that “nearly every Puritan home in New England contained a copy of *The Tenth Muse*.” (Gordon). It seems that although Bradstreet’s writing style deviated from traditional Puritan style, her poetry was still considered of a high enough caliber that all the Puritans would own a copy of her poetry collection. The fact that a woman had written the poetry did not seem to have decreased her poetry’s popularity either.

### 3. Biography of Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley was born in either Senegal or Gambia in Africa in 1753 and was sold to be a slave when she was eight years old. Her owner was John Wheatley, a rich tailor, who wanted someone to provide his wife, Susannah, with companionship. John and Susannah named Wheatley after the boat she travelled to Boston in (Baym and Levine 763). Being renamed seemed to signify a clear distinction between a person's life "before" and "after" being sold into slavery. It stripped them of their previous identity.

Although Phillis Wheatley's circumstances were far from ideal, Susannah had empathy for her and gave Wheatley the opportunity to learn to read and write (Baym and Levine 763). This was a time in America when women were normally only educated to gain skills in housework so as to attract a good husband. Highly educated women were considered "unusual" and "not sought after". However, the type of education that was provided in America was also often based on the European education system. Girls from rich families in Europe were taught by governesses or attended convent schools, where they learned basic reading and writing skills. Families in the middle class would usually send only their sons to schools and not their daughters because of the high cost of education. Poorer families could not afford to send their children to school at all (NWHM Exhibit). With these circumstances in mind, Phillis Wheatley's chance to receive an education as a slave was miraculous. She became very familiar with the Bible as well as the works of poets John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray. These poets came to have a strong impact on Wheatley's poetry.

John and Susannah Wheatley were a part of a group of enlightened Boston Christians. The enlightened Christians believed in God and lived their lives with focus on happiness and human achievement ("The Enlightenment or Age of Reason"). The enlightened Christians found slavery

“incompatible” with their Christian beliefs. While this seems ironic since the Wheatleys had a slave, it also meant that Phillis Wheatley was largely around people who did not believe that slavery should be practiced (Baym and Levine 763). Wheatley was given the opportunity to “mix socially” with John and Susannah’s “politically, religiously, and socially prominent guests.”, and evidence implies that Wheatley was allowed to eat at the same table as these guests, although she usually declined doing so (Carretta 23). This seems remarkable considering that she was a slave to this family; it appears that she was treated more like a part of the family than as a worker.

One possibility behind these unusual allowances on the parts of John and Susannah is that they treated Wheatley well in order to showcase their piety and generosity through kindness to a slave. As John and Susannah ensured Wheatley was trained in both religion and education, Wheatley wrote poetry about religion, which reflected well on her owners (Carretta 23). However, as manipulated as the situation might have been, the thoughts, beliefs, and writings were still Wheatley’s own. She believed in God and wrote about her faith in her poems, among other things. She was nineteen or twenty years of age when her first collection of poems, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, was published in London. Wheatley went with John to attend her poetry’s publication, and her poetry was very well received by the British. In fact, it was “widely and enthusiastically received in British periodicals” and was considered “evidence of African intelligence in abolitionist documents” for many years after (Fulford and Kitson 69). Wheatley’s unique position of being a slave as well as a poet set her apart from other poets of the time. She wrote with a strong sense of humanity and sensibility that filled her oppressors with compassion (Ingrassia and Ravel 98). More than a decade after Wheatley’s poetry was first published came an “outpouring of antislavery poetry” that was heavily influenced by Wheatley’s writing style (Ingrassia and Ravel 99). Wheatley’s style allowed her to move past “the confines

of condescension and spectatorship” that were associated with being a slave. She connected the discussion of slavery and the sublime, holding up the practice of slavery as one that needed to be abolished for both ethical and aesthetic reasons. Antislavery poets that came after her adopted her use of the mixture of the sublime, sensibility, and personification as well in their attempts to change the viewpoints of their readers (Ingrassia and Ravel 105). Not only did Wheatley have a strong impact on her readers at the time of her poetry’s publication, but she also had a lasting impact on the antislavery poetry that followed hers.

#### 4. ‘*Contemplations*’ and ‘Thoughts on the Works of Providence’

In 1678, Bradstreet’s poem “*Contemplations*” was published as a part of her poetry collection (Baym and Levine 215). The poem contains 33 seven-line stanzas and is made up of Bradstreet’s pondering on nature as God’s creations. Throughout the poem, Bradstreet links the creation she observed around her to God and the Bible. In the eighth stanza of her poem, she writes,

Silent alone, where none or saw, or heard,  
 In pathless paths I lead my wand’ring feet,  
 My humble eyes to lofty skies I reared  
 To sing some song, my mazed Muse thought meet,  
 My great Creator I would magnify,  
 That nature had thus decked liberally;

But Ah, and Ah, again, my imbecility! (Baym and Levine 214).

Bradstreet’s poetry closely links the wonders in nature she sees around her with her faith in God. She talks about walking alone in nature and looking up to the sky, inspired by her surroundings to praise God. The juxtaposition of the phrases “my humble eyes” and “lofty skies” suggests her deference to God and seems a clear indication that she sees God as a mighty being to whom she



cannot come close to measuring up. Wheatley expresses a similar view of God's greatness in her poem "Thoughts on the Works of Providence", in which she writes with reference to God, "His radiance dazzles mortal sight." While Bradstreet was a Puritan and Wheatley an enlightened Christian, both shared the belief that they were unworthy of looking upon their Creator.

Wheatley, like Bradstreet, uses nature as evidence of God's existence and reason to praise Him. Her poem, 'Thoughts on the Works of Providence,' was published in 1773 and is made up of heroic couplets. In one stanza, Wheatley writes,

But see the sons of vegetation rise  
 And spread their leafy banners to the skies.  
 All-wise Almighty providence we trace  
 In trees, and plants, and all the flowery race. (Baym and Levine 769).

While Bradstreet's and Wheatley's religions held different emphases – Puritans and enlightened Christians were both Christian in basis but did not have much in common besides that -- their faiths were highly important to each of them, and the manner in which they chose to write about their faiths was similar. Wheatley suggests that she also sees evidence of God in the creations around her: "All-wise Almighty providence we trace/In trees, and plants, and all the flowery race." Her words convey a sense of awe of her surroundings, an emotion that is clear in Bradstreet's '*Contemplations*' as well.

While Wheatley's poetic form of heroic couplets is clear throughout her poem, Bradstreet's is less consistent. However, both '*Contemplations*' and 'Thoughts on the Works of Providence' are works comprising of many stanzas and find their themes in pondering the beauty of God's creation.

From these contemplations on God's creation, both poets link back to praising God and reflecting on Biblical truths. In Bradstreet's case, she brings up Bible stories such as the one of Cain and Abel, in lines such as, "Here Cain and Abel come to sacrifice,/Fruits of the earth and fatlings each do bring." As for Wheatley, she writes about the creation story: "'Let there be light,'" He said. From his profound/Old Chaos heard, and trembled at the sound." (Baym and Levine). There are parallels between the writings of Bradstreet and Wheatley although at the same time, each of the two poets expresses herself in a different way. Bradstreet uses a straightforward, storytelling-like approach in her description of the story of Cain and Abel while the words Wheatley uses to describe the creation story are more evocative, bringing a more powerful image to mind.

## 5. Conclusion

While this discussion of Bradstreet and Wheatley is certainly not extensive, it has shown that despite coming from very different backgrounds and living in different time periods, Bradstreet and Wheatley held similar interests in what they wanted to write about. They were both "pioneers" in their field: Bradstreet the first American poet to be published – and a woman, nonetheless, and Wheatley an African American poet who also happened to be a slave. Both were unprecedented in the poetry world during the time periods they lived in, and yet both found success in their writing careers and have made long-lasting impressions with works that are still read and studied centuries after they were first published.

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