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Anxiety of Authorship and Self Civil War in Anne Bradstreet's Poetry

Roberta Gupta

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, writes, "It is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary Elizabethan literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet." Woolf, of course, writes ironically. Part of her purpose as critic is to explain why women artists have not flourished in the past. She and other feminist critics have shown that the traditional male attitudes toward female literary endeavor imposed strong inhibitions on the female artist's psyche. Women saw themselves as upstarts and deviants if they aspired to write, and thus the work they produced was almost always apologetic and anxious.

As Harold Bloom has pointed out, male artists also suffer from anxiety, but theirs is an "anxiety of influence"—a fear that one comes too late in history to produce anything original. Bloom views this anxiety as the source of an Oedipal triangle in which the precursor-poet is the father, the later poet the son, and the Muse the mother whom the son desires to wrest from the father's possession. He shows how the later poet devises various literary techniques to help him work through this anxiety to a point where the precursor ceases to threaten and becomes, instead, a source of inspiration and creativity. From the essential Oedipal struggle the later poet gains strength and energy, and from the outcome—when it results in his victory—the assumption of his own individuality, proven when he "begets" his own creations upon the Muse.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the feminist authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a study of nineteenth-century women writers, show how the "anxiety of influence" assumes a different form in female artists. For male writers, the precursor's influence is never entirely negative because it endorses the masculine creative principle and provides men with a literary tradition. For the woman writer, these strong father-figures are, literally, her masters who, "despite their authority, . . . fail to define the ways in which
she experiences her own identity as a writer.” Her anxiety, therefore, becomes “an even more primary ‘anxiety of authorship’—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will destroy her.” In other words, every male writer can become a “father”—a progenitor in his own right—by producing offspring with the female Muse. A woman can never become a father; a minion cannot assert primacy over her master.

Anxiety is evident in the works of women writers of the past, who all seem compelled to deny any aspiration to equality with their male contemporaries. For them, they confess, the Muse is essentially impotent, and their union with her of a covert and devious nature. Gilbert and Gubar quote the eighteenth-century writer Anne Finch on this subject:

Be caution’d then my Muse, and still retir’d;
Nor be dispis’d, aiming to be admir’d;
Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of Lawrell, thou wert never meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.  

The “anxiety of authorship” felt by a secular woman writer assumes a more complex form in the works of the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet. Here, the woman writer’s doubt and guilt-infected question “Can I create?” becomes “Should I dare to try?” As a Puritan, Bradstreet experienced an anxiety which emanated from two sources. One was her human “master,” Du Bartas, to whom her male admirers consistently compare her in a manner that elevates the male poet while reducing his successor to the role of daughter or pupil, as in the epigram that accompanied her first published volume: “Artes bred neat An.” Nathaniel Ward calls Bradstreet “a right Du Bartus girl,” an offers and ambiguous compliment that might also be taken as a warning: “I muse whither at length these girls will go” (p. 5). This statement may well have chilled Anne Bradstreet with its hidden implication, for the other source of her anxiety was superhuman, and where she hoped at length to go was to her God and that glorious afterlife to which all Puritans aspired. The possible loss of this afterlife through God’s rejection of them for being too “worldly” caused fear and anxiety in each individual. Bradstreet must have been
among those who felt anxiety most acutely, for to the “sins” of self-involvement and love of the world she was, as a writer, very vulnerable.

The anxiety she felt toward her human “master,” the Calvinist poet Du Bartas, is expressed in her early poems in the form of a denial—a technique commonly employed by male writers who felt overshadowed by a “father.” In a poem written “To Her Most Honoured Father,” she demonstrates both her fear of impotence because she lacks “an eagle’s quill”—the male phallus-pen7 with which Du Bartas “begat” his poems—and her sense of being reduced to the status of imitator. She tells her father that she fears “you’d judge Du Bartus was my friend,” and assures him, “My goods are true (though poor), I love no stealth” (p. 14). Yet, Du Bartas’s influence is apparent in these early works, in her attempt to emulate his display of learning and high style, and in the impersonal, abstract themes.

In maturity, Bradstreet escaped this “anxiety of influence” by discovering her own, much more personal themes. But the tension manifested in this later poetry stems from a much greater anxiety. She feared incurring the wrath of God—the original progenitor of all humankind—which she risked because, according to Puritan teaching, an assertion of individuality, of the self, was synonymous with rejection of God’s omnipotence. For the Puritans there could only, ever, be one Precursor, and His authorship could never safely be challenged or rejected. To understand how this anxiety affects Bradstreet’s poetry a review of Puritan doctrine is necessary.

Only through complete subservience to God’s will, which required the total obliteration of self-will, could Puritans hope to attain the afterlife. This crucial doctrine, and the anxiety it caused among the faithful, are described by Sacvan Bercovitch in his book The Puritan Origins of the American Self. The Puritans, Bercovitch reminds us, understood their religious calling as both “the inward call to redemption, and the summons to a social vocation.”8

Among men this concept was best realized in the character of the good governor, men like John Winthrop who guided, nurtured, and corrected the members of his community according to God’s laws. The governor was both God’s representative (as a diligent servant may represent his master without ever claiming similar status or authority) and the embodiment of the role Puritan men
were expected to assume in society, and within their families. Men ruled and judged, but only in their capacity as God’s servants. God acted through them, and His actions were facilitated according to the degree of self-obliteration the human mediator attained.

Puritan women, too, received a spiritual calling, but their vocation was confined to the home. As Edmund S. Morgan has shown in *The Puritan Family*, their primary duty was to provide a Christian environment in which children’s souls could be nurtured and in which, by loving God above spouse or offspring, they set an example to younger members of their families. In this spirit, Anne Bradstreet writes, of her husband’s absence from home:

> Though husband dear be from me gone
> Whom I do love so well,
> I have a more beloved one
> Whose comforts far excel. (p. 267)

In Puritan women, self-negation was demonstrated not only through their submission to God, but by their deference to their husbands. Thus, another of Bradstreet’s poems to her husband begins, “My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life,” but claims him as her chief joy only among her “earthly store” (p. 226). The precendence belongs, always, to God. The disparity we sometimes detect in her poems between her proclaimed adherence to this priority and her underlying ambivalence points up the deepest source of her “anxiety of authorship.” As a Puritan author she could write in good conscience only if her sole purpose was to glorify God. When her poems glorify instead worldly attributes such as sexual love between husband and wife, or when they imply too much dependence on worldly happiness, she is stepping dangerously close to the “sins” of self-involvement and self-gratification and in doing so hazards her immortal soul. In the poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” she writes, “If ever wife was happy in a man / Compare with me, ye women, if you can” (p. 225). Lines such as these, infused with ardor and pride, must have caused anxiety and did (as we see in later poems) cause penitence.

As author, Bradstreet is not simply challenging a masculine prerogative. She is creating a new self, the poet-self who seeks to establish, through works, its own immortality—a gift which only
God can grant, and grants only as an afterlife, not as worldly fame. Thus, in assuming authorship, she risks the heresy of self-pride. As a Puritan, her “anxiety of authorship” and its natural outgrowth—the divided self—takes a radically different form from the “anxiety of authorship” experienced by secular women writers. Bradstreet is caught in a double bind. She fears male disapproval of her work, but should she gain the world’s praise, she risks her soul. There is also another and possibly, to Bradstreet, worse punishment for valuing too highly one’s “earthly store.” As I will show, she feared that God might chastise her by removing her sources of worldly happiness.

Bercovitch comments that among the Puritans, “selfhood appears as a state to be . . . obliterated; and identity is asserted through an act of submission to a transcendent absolute” (PO, p. 13). Yet, he explains, Puritanism also required that each Christian make his faith public, as witness to God’s eternal grace. The problem of speaking or writing personally without emphasizing the self was overcome in “the countless testimonies, declarations, relations . . . broadside manifestos” of the time because the authors “fit their most intimate experiences to the contours of christology, subsuming anything unique about themselves into a few standard structural and verbal forms” (PO, p. 15).

But what of those Puritans like Bradstreet who chose to “speak” in the poetic mode? The choice itself implies some degree of self-involvement, and a need for assertion that “a few standard structural and verbal forms” could not satisfy. They might—and did—write poetry-as-testimony. They were also compelled to use the mode as a means of exploring the dilemma of selfhood. This dilemma Bercovitch, drawing a metaphor from George Goodwin’s poetry, terms “Self Civil War.” The poetry that emanated from the artist simultaneously battling against and giving expression to his self is filled with a “constant barrage of images of violence and struggle” (PO, p. 20).

Anne Bradstreet, in her poem “For Deliverance From Fever,” uses physical sickness as a metaphor for the anguish that burns within:

Beclouded was my soul with fear
Of Thy displeasure sore,
Nor could I read my evidence
Which oft I read before.

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"Hide not Thy Face from me!" I cried,
"From burnings keep my soul." (p. 247)

The major problems confronting Anne Bradstreet as a writer, then, were "anxiety of authorship" as I have defined it in the question "Should I dare?" and "Self Civil War," the battle between self-assertion and self-negation. (As I will show, in Bradstreet's work, in addition to the assertion of the poet-self other forms of self-assertion occur in the extreme love she shows for her family, most particularly for her husband.)

The difference between "anxiety of authorship" and "Self Civil War" is that the first requires an initial justification for writing at all. It is mainly a prewriting anxiety—a kind of writer's block. Bradstreet seems to have suffered from this inhibition in her early poems, which show little originality and offer no indication of the nature of the writer—a nature that later surprises us by its intensity of feeling and ardor for life. Bradstreet overcame her "anxiety of authorship" by declaring that her work was her witness. To write of her personal experiences—her lapses into temptation, her subsequent suffering, her "illuminations" and her forgiveness—was to testify to God's mercy. Thus her poem "For Deliverance From A Fever" ends,

O, praises to my mighty God,
Praise to my Lord, I say,
Who hath redeemed my soul from pit,
Praises to Him for aye. (p. 247)

And a poem written during one of her husband's absences ends, "O Lord, Thou know'st my weak desire / Was to sing praise to Thee" (p. 265).

The second problem, "Self Civil War," occurs in the actual writing process. The poet must now abide by her claim that she is merely God's instrument and produce poetry-as-testimony, shriven of self-involvement and worldly interest. This kind of poetry Bradstreet often fails to accomplish. Had she succeeded, perhaps she would not interest us as much as she does. The Puritan's failure—the lapse into vivid, energetic, passionate verse that extols human love—marks the poet's major achievement.

By nature, Bradstreet seems incapable of writing with austerity and rigid self-control. Where she loved—her husband, her
children, her work—she was always in danger of loving to excess. The Puritan doctrine, while advocating family love, warned that earthly attachments were transient and could never substitute for the relationship of the individual to her God. Furthermore, as David E. Stannard points out in *The Puritan Way of Death*, to covet too deeply the things of the world was to risk losing them. God, ever-watchful over the souls of the elect, might take away loved ones as a reminder and a correction. This is the other punishment for valuing “earthly store” and Bradstreet was always acutely aware of it. The anxiety of misplaced love, the fear of loss—both of her own soul and of loved ones—as well as covert rebellion against the injunction to stoicism are all recurring themes in her later poetry.

Published posthumously, these poems deal almost exclusively with family love, family losses, and her own recurring sickness. Here, Bradstreet reveals an intensity of love for her husband and children that sharply conflicts with Puritan doctrine. (Which explains, perhaps, why no one discovered and published these poems during her life, as her brother-in-law had found and published her early work.) Here we discover a woman who cared too deeply about this life and suffered guilt and anxiety as a result. In this later body of work the struggle—and the rebellion—in the “Self Civil War” is very evident.

In the poems addressed to her husband, she expresses forcefully her overwhelming sense of loss during his absence. She also hints, poignantly, that she does not feel loved to the extent that she herself is capable of loving. In the first of two poems titled “Another,” she writes, “Commend me to the man more loved than life, / Show him the sorrows of his widowed wife,” and asks, “And if he love, how can he there abide?” (p. 227). The second poem of this pair begins with the line, “As loving hind that (hartless) wants her deer” (p. 229). In another poem, “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” she pleads that her husband not remarry in the event of her death (p. 224). All three poems point up another source of fear in Bradstreet’s love for her husband. The recurring question, implicit in all these works, seems to be, how much does he love her? During their separations her sense of loss is so great that she feels “widowed” and “hartless” (an ambiguous word which may have had a dual meaning for Bradstreet, referring both to her own deprivation and her husband’s apparent “heartlessness”). But if the situation were reversed, she seems to
suspect that her spouse would find comfort in remarriage. **She** cannot endure life without him, but she fears this exclusive love is not reciprocated.

In the first “Another” poem, she seems to gently chide him for being remiss in sending her news of himself. The poem is addressed to Phoebus, a deity whom Bradstreet visualizes as an ardent and faithful mate who makes a fitting messenger on her behalf:

Tell him the countless steps that thou dost trace,  
That once a day thy spouse thou may’st embrace;  
And when thou canst not treat by loving mouth,  
Thy rays afar salute her from the south. (p. 229)

When her husband read these poems (if he did), one wonders whether he was flattered and moved, or whether he felt duty-bound to caution her for the sake of her soul. Was he a “better”—a more orthodox—Puritan than she, able to keep his love in proportion? As head of the family and her guide, did he reprimand her (kindly)? Or did she keep these poems from him, a part of her secret self?

Later, in the “Another” poem quoted above, she writes:

O Phoebus, hadst thou but thus long from thine  
Restrained the beams of thy beloved shine,  
At thy return, if so thou could’st or durst,  
Behold a Chaos blacker than the first  
Tell him here’s worse than a confused matter. (p. 227-28)

The line, “At thy return, if so thou could’st or durst,” seems fraught with implied meaning, for how does one interpret the “Chaos” her husband dare not behold, if not as a metaphor for her excessive love, which, if unchecked and reciprocated, might damn them both?

Further ambiguities occur toward the poem’s close. She writes, “Tell him I would say more, but cannot well / Oppressed minds abruptest tales do tell” (p. 228). She is oppressed by his absence, of course, but it seems that we can infer an additional oppression imposed by that Puritan self, striving, often vainly but always unremittingly, to restrain the other self—the wife and lover who too often forgets prudence and writes such lines as, “I wish my
Sun may never set, but burn / Within the Cancer of my glowing breast” (p. 228), or “Naught but the fervor of his ardent beams / Hath power to dry the torrent of these streams” (p. 228).

Adrienne Rich writes, “Younger, Anne Bradstreet had struggled with a ‘carnall heart’” (Foreword, p. xi). Although Rich refers to a period during Bradstreet’s extreme youth, the struggle seems never to have given her respite. Jeannine Hensley comments, “she dedicated poet and poem to her father, to her husband, and to God. Around these three masculine figures most of her loving devotion centred” (Introduction, p. xxiv). And around them, too, one might add, centered her major fears and anxieties as a Puritan woman. From their maleness, their stern and upright demeanor, she must have taken her image of her God. If she doubts her husband’s approval of this “confused matter” of priorities in love, his disapproval surely reflects the sterner, more powerful judgment from her God for writing poetry that is too often secular in its concerns.

This judgment Bradstreet must often have believed visited upon her, both in her own frequent sickness, and in her husband’s illness. Her ill health, the subject of several frightened and penitent poems, seems to have been aggravated to some degree by her anxiety. Significantly, she often feels most confident of salvation immediately after one of these bouts of sickness. In “Upon Some Distemper of Body,” she sees, following her recovery from the physical travail, “My anchor cast i’ the vale with safety” (p. 223), and in “From Another Sore Fit,” her realization that “naught on earth could comfort give” is followed by an “illumination” which provides temporary release: “And when my soul these things abhorred, / Then, Lord, Thou said’st unto me, ’Live’” (p. 248).

God is stern but merciful. Through sickness she is brought to an awareness of him as the primary claimant of her love and the author of her life. Thus chastened and penitent, she is permitted to go on living among her earthly loved ones. Her brush with death helps her keep things in proportion, to sustain the correct degrees of love, and after these experiences she is able to write pure poetry-as-testimony, unsullied by covert desires.

This partial resolution of the “Self Civil War” Bercovitch describes as a “temporary truce,” and, quoting Louis Martz, adds that there sometimes occurs in Puritan writing “a moment of illumination, where the speaker’s self has, for a time, found the answer to its conflicts” (PO, p. 20). A similar moment occurs for
Bradstreet in "For the Restoration of My Dear Husband From a Burning Ague, June 1, 1661." She writes,

My thankful heart with pen record
The goodness of thy God,
Let thy obedience testify
He taught thee with his rod. (p. 261)

The rod is also a "staff" that supports, "That thou by both may'st learn, / And 'twixt the good and evil way / At last, thou might'st discern" (p. 201). But if she can interpret sickness as God's necessary correction, she finds actual death—especially the death of children—much more difficult to accept. In those poems written on the loss of children one discerns, beneath the Puritan's resignation, the woman's bitterness. Thus, in a poem written on the death of a grandchild, Simon Bradstreet—the third grandchild to die within the space of a few years—she writes,

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. (p. 237)

Beginning with the statement structured as an implied question, "yet is He good," the sentiments expressed in these lines are ambiguous. The injunction, twice-repeated, "let's not," "let's say," implies a reluctance fully to affirm God's actions or His mercy. Stannard points out that the Puritan doctrine proclaiming death as a happy release from the world caused conflict and guilt among its adherents, who were not permitted to show "immoderate" grief for the loss of those whom they loved. As an example of this conflict, he quotes Bradstreet's "elegy for her father, in which she announced that she was 'By duty bound and not by custom led / To celebrate the praises of the dead.'" Stannard comments that "by comparison with others Bradstreet was being positively emotional."12

This conflict of the divided self, manifested in covert wishes, rebellion, and penitence, is exacerbated by Bradstreet's desire to live on, not only in her loved ones' memories but also in the
world's recognition of her as a poet. In "The Author To Her Book," written after the publication of her first volume of poetry, she evinces all the concerns of a serious writer. She is troubled by misgivings regarding the merit and style of her work, wonders what critical reception it will receive, and denies influence:

In critics hands beware thou dost not come,
And take thy way where yet thou art not known;
If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door. (p. 221)

The line, "And take thy way where yet thou art not known," seems to express a hope for posterity's regard. The line, "If for thy father asked," denies influence. The concerns represented in the lines quoted here remained with Bradstreet throughout her writing career. In a much later letter to her children, she shows an acute consciousness of style in the defense, "This was written in much sickness and weakness, and is very weakly and imperfectly done" (p. 245). In the 1664 preface to the "Meditations," written for her son Simon Bradstreet, she states, "I have avoided encroaching upon others' conceptions because I would leave you nothing but mine own" (p. 271).

But in the "Meditations" one begins to discern a change in tone, as well as a shift in focus. Meditation 24 affirms, somewhat wearily,

There is no new thing under the sun; there is nothing that can be said or done, but either that or something like it hath been done and said before. (p. 276)

Here, Bradstreet's paraphrase of the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, verses nine and ten, seems consciously ironic. She voices her disillusionment with artistic creation in words that have already been used, thus pointing up the impossibility of attaining a truly original mode of expression. More significantly, the Biblical reference pays homage to the Creator and implies that, finally, she has relinquished the desires that prevented total submission to her Maker.

This shift in tone and mood becomes characteristic of the "Meditations" and of the two final poems. There is more
resignation now, passion has mellowed and the struggle is done with. In old age, Bradstreet seems to have achieved, at last, a release from the inner turmoil that troubled her in maturity. The ardor for life that gave energy and tension to her earlier poems has been transmuted into a longing for the afterlife and its uninterrupted, permanent peace. Earthly life, although—perhaps because—so greatly prized, was for her “With sins, with cares and sorrows vex’t,” and its appeal has waned. In her last poem, “As Weary Pilgrim,” her single desire is “to be at rest / And soar on high among the blest” (p. 294).

This poem is “untainted” by the worldly desires which for her, as a Puritan, were synonymous with worldly affliction. Her wish for the body’s “sleep” leads into a catalogue of these afflictions, and she looks forward to their end when

No fainting fits shall me assail,
Nor grinding pains my body frail,
With cares and fears ne’er cumb’red be
Nor losses know, nor sorrows see. (p. 294)

Her relinquishment of the life struggle is perhaps—when one recalls the love poems to her husband—most unequivocally and poignantly expressed in the last line of this poem, “Then come, dear Bridegroom, come away” (p. 295). Here, at last, her love has settled upon its rightful possessor and progenitor.

If Anne Bradstreet’s poetry both expresses and attempts to resolve her “Self Civil War,” then perhaps the silence which ensued during the last seven years of life testifies to her attainment of that resolution. The daughter, the wife, the mother, the lover, and the author finally dissolved perhaps, as she had always wished them to, into the Puritan self.

Harold Bloom sees the later poet’s freedom from his precursor as occurring when he rises, triumphant, from the Oedipal conflict, to create his own text. Gilbert and Gubar see nineteenth-century women artists attaining some degree of freedom in the outcast figure who recurs in their literature—the madwoman in Jane Eyre, for example—and who “speaks” about their oppression and embodies their rebellion. For Bradstreet, who was neither a secular writer nor a feminist, freedom could never be found in the text. It existed solely in the afterlife.
NOTES

1Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), 43.
4Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman, 49.
5Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman, 10-11.
7See Madwoman, Chapter One.
10Robert Daly in God’s Altar: The World and the Flesh in Puritan Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) argues that many modern critics of Bradstreet have misinterpreted her poetry. Bradstreet, Daly asserts, was not the rebel recent critics have considered her. Her use of sensuous imagery and the poems expressing strong affection for her family and the natural world are not contrary to Puritan doctrine. Other Puritan poets also praised nature, and the Puritan faith did not forbid its adherents to form strong attachments or to take pleasure in the sensible world. In fact, human creatures and the natural environment were figurations of God's love for the world. By loving the temporary, earthly representations of God's beneficence, Puritans learned to love God and look forward to the permanence of Heaven. The difference between love for God and love for other human beings is one of degree (pp. 84-86). Daly states that for orthodox Puritans the world was empty when compared with its Creator and therefore,

though man is permitted, indeed required, to love the world . . . he must “wean” his affections from the unmixed love of it if he is to pass from this world into the next. The man who cannot do so gives to the creatures a complete love rightfully belonging to the Creator and therefore commits idolatry. (p. 85)

I agree with Daly that Bradstreet struggled to “wean” herself from an “unmixed love” of the sensible world, and that the majority of her poems subscribe to orthodox Puritan doctrine. However, the main thrust of my argument is that Bradstreet experienced extreme difficulty in accepting emotionally what she knew intellectually. She knew that the world and its rewards—love, fame, artistic satisfaction—were transient. She knew that
she should place God first in her heart, and that failure to do so might lead to the loss of her soul. But I contend that she suffered anxiety because she frequently fell short of Puritan ideals. I believe that her poetry reveals a woman who often experienced the forbidden “unmixed love” for her husband, her children—and for her vocation as a poet. The Puritan woman should achieve a state of mind in which she could “without rancor bid goodby at death to things [she] loved all too well” (p. 86). Until old age, Bradstreet was not able to achieve this state. For her, the degrees of loving imposed a lifelong struggle. The course of that struggle, and its ultimate resolution, are traced in this essay.
