

'The Prologue' (1650): An Overview

Dr. Sudeshna Majumdar
Assistant Professor of English
Rampurhat College

Introduction

Anne Bradstreet (1612- 1672) is regarded as the first professional woman writer of 17th-Century American Literature. Her poem 'The Prologue' (1650) portrays her struggle in the way of becoming a professional writer in a Puritan society. In this poem through her apparently submissive tone she suggests that women are capable of rational thinking and articulation in spite of patriarchal suppression and Puritanical hegemony.

- Anne was born in England. Anne's father Thomas Dudley was a steward of the Earl of Lincoln. She grew up in a highly cultured ambiance and became a well-educated woman of her times.
- She got married at the age of 16 and she emigrated to America along with her parents and husband in the 1630s.
- Since 1650 Anne Bradstreet published a number of poetry and her works had a mixed reception. Being a woman poet in a Puritan society she was much criticized in the male dominated literary world. However her fame was enduring and she was hailed by successive generations as the proto-feminist poet of early American Literature.
- Her collection of poetry emphasizes on wit and learning.
- She wrote on a vast range of subjects that included politics, history, religion and domestic experience.

'The Prologue' : A Confessional Poem

- **A Confessional Poem**
- Confessional poetry emerged in America of the 1950s. It focused on individual experience, subjective mind, personal trauma and offered a look within the mind of the poet. It is known as 'the poetry of the personal'.
- It is interesting to notice how 300 years before the creation of this genre Anne Bradstreet was writing in the same mode in 1650.
- 'The Prologue' is confessional in the sense, here the poet reflects on her own career as a professional poet and comments on her own writing capabilities, while addressing her critics.

To sing of Wars, of Captains, and of Kings,

Of Cities founded, Common-wealths begun,

Sudeshna Majumdar
Teacher-In-Charge
Rampurhat College
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**For my mean Pen are too superior things;
Or how they all, or each their dates have run,
Let Poets and Historians set these forth.
My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.**

- The poem begins with a submissive tone where the poet compares and contrasts her own intimate lyrical style with the grand epic style of male poets.
- Her tone reminds us of the opening lines of Virgil's *Aenied*: "To arms and the man I sing" and by saying that wars, captains and kings are too superior subjects for her, she seems to satirize the epic style.
- Through references to Commonwealths and Cities she mentions her contemporary historical scenario that experienced English Civil War (1642) and establishment of the Commonwealth (1649).

**But when my wond'ring eyes and envious heart
Great Bartas' sugar'd lines do but read o'er,
Fool, I do grudge the Muses did not part
'Twixt him and me that over-fluent store.
A Bartas can do what a Bartas will
But simple I according to my skill.**

- She refers to Guillaume Du Bartas, the 16th-C French poet and expresses her regards to his writings. Anne Bradstreet was an admirer of the works of Du Bartas.

She is happy that nature has endowed her with equal poetic talent as Du Bartas. She feels content with her own skill.

She makes an obliquely satirical comment on the male dominance in literary domain.

**From School-boy's tongue no Rhet'ric we expect,
Nor yet a sweet Consort from broken strings,
Nor perfect beauty where's a main defect.
My foolish, broken, blemished Muse so sings,
And this to mend, alas, no Art is able,
'Cause Nature made it so irreparable.**

- She has no bombastic literary ambition. She applies the metaphor of a school-boy and a broken string to describe her own mediocre and naive literary abilities.
- She refers to the harsh criticism she faced regarding her works that hurt her spirits and hence she described her muse as “foolish, broken, blemished”.
- Though she leaves the elevated subjects to male poets to boast their male ego, thereby she makes a humorous attack on male ego.

Nor can I, like that fluent sweet-tongued Greek

Who lisp'd at first, in future times speak plain.

By Art he gladly found what he did seek,

A full requital of his striving pain.

Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure:

A weak or wounded brain admits no cure.

- She refers to the Greek philosopher Demosthenes, who has a speech-problem, which he overcame with hard work. .
- But Anne Bradstreet suggests, she had received much antagonism from society and her mind is wounded beyond recovery.

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue

Who says my hand a needle better fits.

A Poet's Pen all scorn I should thus wrong,

For such despite they cast on female wits.

If what I do prove well, it won't advance,

They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance.

- She takes on the male critics who delimited women under certain stereotypes.
- They prefer to see her sewing and doing household works rather than writing.
- The patriarchal society does not recognize 'female wits'. Even if she writes well, they would say she stole other's ideas and she succeeded 'by chance'.
- Women are never given credits for their cerebral pursuits.

But sure the antique Greeks were far more mild,

Else of our Sex, why feigned they those nine

And poesy made Calliope's own child?

So 'mongst the rest they placed the Arts divine,

But this weak knot they will full soon untie.

The Greeks did nought but play the fools and lie.

- She reminds the readers that ancient Greeks were far enlightened than her contemporary Puritan society, because they acknowledged the creativity of woman.
- Sapho, the famous Greek poet was a woman.
- The patron goddess of epic poetry Calliope was conceived as a woman by the Greeks.

Let Greeks be Greeks, and Women what they are.

Men have precedency and still excel;

It is but vain unjustly to wage war.

Men can do best, and Women know it well.

Preeminence in all and each is yours;

Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours.

- She suggests that she has no intention to compete with male writers "Men have precedency and still excel."
- She points out the social prejudices that hinders a woman to grow up as writer. Society prefers a man to excel. Her tone is bitter and satirical, but it is concealed beneath her compromising attitude.
- She does not support aggressive attitude of women against men, rather prefers a moderate way to establish the female sex as rational free-thinkers.
- For this moderate and assimilative stance Anne Bradstreet is hailed as a proto-feminist poet.

And oh ye high flown quills that soar the skies,

And ever with your prey still catch your praise,

If e'er you deign these lowly lines your eyes,

Give thyme or Parsley wreath, I ask no Bays.

This mean and unrefined ore of mine

Will make your glist'ring gold but more to shine.

- She just wants her work to be acknowledged for its own worth and she demands the identity of female writers not as superior to male writers but as equal to their male counterparts and special in their own accord.
- She wants her poetry to be recognized not with the traditional 'bay laurels' but with her kitchen herbs 'thyme or parsley'. Thus she connects her poetry with domestic sphere.
- In ancient Greece thyme symbolized valour and heroism. Thus Anne Bradstreet equates her stance with that of the Greek heroes.

Anne Bradstreet's Assimilative Stance

- In a traditional Puritan society women were hardly allowed to exert their opinions. In 17th-Century American society women were seen as domestic creatures meant for child rearing and home making. In such a society, Anne Bradstreet's ambition of becoming a professional writer was considered outrageous. For this free-thinking attitude she is regarded as a proto-feminist poet.
- Through this poem Anne Bradstreet justifies that in spite of male superiority in society, women play vital roles as rational thinkers. Along with her traditional roles a woman should be acknowledged for her creative abilities.
- Beneath her humble tone, there is a tone of disdain and a covert challenge against men. Through an argumentative tension and a chain of assertion the poem suggests a battle of the sexes. However, the poet looks for a social harmony which may be achieved by giving women equal rights as men. This is her assimilative stance for a better society.


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