

“NO RHET’RIC WE EXPECT”:  
ARGUMENTATION IN BRADSTREET’S  
“THE PROLOGUE”  
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For an acknowledgment of a poet's simple capacities and modest literary goals, Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue" elicits strangely varied responses—especially in regard to voice and tone. Is the poet humbly submissive or bitterly angry? Is she self-deprecating and self-denigrating, as some readers find, or a prefeminist champion of her sex? Both extremes find textual justification, depending on the weight one accords her admittedly blemished muse or her anticipated parsley wreath. Perhaps, as Elizabeth Wade White and Robert Arner have suggested, the poem divides structurally and tonally at stanza five, with the first half lamenting the poet's inferiority to male writers and the second half asserting, nonetheless, her right as a woman to express herself in verse.<sup>1</sup> The tension between Bradstreet's modest disclaimers and her spirited self-defense runs through the poem, however; it may be found implicitly in the first stanza and explicitly in the last, and it permeates the language and logic of all "The Prologue." Only by reading the poem as consistently ironic can we hope to appreciate Bradstreet's conscious artfulness in deploying both sides of the argument: inviting both male and female champions (and the vast majority of more tolerant readers) to approach her writing with respect.

As the name indicates, this is a prologue designed to introduce the author to her readers while whetting their interest in the more substantive poems to follow. She proceeds by negation, telling what she cannot hope to do: "To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings, / Of cities founded, commonwealths begun, / For my mean pen are too superior things."<sup>2</sup> But, if we expect her to anticipate Barlow in turning from lofty historical themes to choose "a virgin theme, unconscious of the Muse," we will be unprepared for the succeeding poems. "The Prologue" was never meant to introduce Bradstreet's love poems or meditations; it was written directly for "The Four Monarchies" and was then prefixed to the four quaternions as well as the historical surveys in the opening section of *The Tenth Muse*. Despite her disclaimer, then, Brad-

street proceeded directly to write on the subjects she so pointedly reserved for poets and historians. The opening lines introduce an ironic counterpointing of claimed incapacity and demonstrated command which would enliven the whole poem.

The key to Bradstreet's strategy in preceding her lengthy, laborious, learned scholarly poems with this engaging prologue comes in the opening of stanza three: "From schoolboy's tongue no rhet'ric we expect." Like so many parts of the poem, this line has dual implications. We do not, in fact, count on hearing eloquent orations from schoolchildren, but we must recall that Bradstreet's contemporaries expected, in the sense of looked forward to, such skill as a probable outcome of the boy's education. From grammar, the student would proceed in course through the rest of the trivium: logic and rhetoric. In likening herself to the schoolboy, the poet suggests her own capacity to advance in the verbal arts—especially the art of persuasion. When we do not expect rhetoric, we may not even notice it; but we can be influenced by it, despite ourselves. As Henry Peacham wrote in the 1593 *Garden of Eloquence*, "By the benefit of this excellent gift, (I meane of apt speech given by nature, and guided by Art) wisdom appeareth in her beautie, sheweth her maiestie, and exerciseth her power, working in the minde of the hearer, partly by a pleasant proportion . . . and partly by the secret and mightie power of perswasion after a most wonderfull manner."<sup>3</sup> Bradstreet praised apt speech given by nature and guided by Art in "The Prologue" and demonstrated it as well, keeping a pleasant proportion between instruction and delight to achieve a secret but significant power of persuasion. By recognizing her dexterity in manipulating logic and rhetoric, by remembering Rosamund Rosenmeier's caution that we must read Bradstreet as "someone accustomed to thinking figurally,"<sup>4</sup> and by responding to her varied cultural allusions, we can appreciate the complexity and sophistication of her apparently simple argument.

Like most of Bradstreet's successful poems, "The Prologue" is an argument: an attempt to articulate and reconcile opposition by emphasizing discrepancies while hinting at unity. As Ann Stanford has noted, the histories which "The Prologue" introduces fail as literature partly because they lack the tension the poet knew how to achieve when she engaged an I-narrator in vigorous argumentation.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the quaternions, in each of which the four speakers demonstrate a different argumentative method, "The Four Monarchies" proceeds by discursive, impersonal narration.<sup>6</sup> Bradstreet may have needed the chance to spar off against assumed sexist opponents in order to release the energy and excitement her familiar readers would anticipate in a new grouping of her poems.

With whom is Bradstreet actually arguing here? Certainly not with Thomas Dudley and the circle of admiring friends among whom she circulated her manuscripts. Textual analysis shows no direct personal address until stanza seven, when she says, "Preeminence in all and each is yours" to an inclusive audience of the whole male sex; but the apostrophe in stanza eight addresses a different you, limited to the great poets: ". . . ye high flown quills that soar the skies." Her debate, however, seems to be with other antagonists—each "carping tongue" who belittles "female wits." Who those carping tongues might be remains a question. Although Jeannine Hensley, Elizabeth Wade White, and Ann Stanford all assume the reality of such criticism, they offer no specific examples. Those who sympathize with the poet's presumed cultural isolation as a frontier woman artist speak of the pain she "must have" felt and the insults she "must have" endured—linking her with Anne Hutchinson and Anne Hopkins, two well-documented examples of Puritan women who suffered for their intellectual aspirations. Yet Hensley admits that "we have no contemporary reference to her or her poetry which is not somewhere between admiration and adulation." There is simply no evidence of the attacks to which she retorts in "The Prologue."

The carping tongues, probably imagined, offered a useful opportunity for forceful, witty expression in this ironic battle of the sexes. Straw men, they were set up only to be knocked down. None of the deference Bradstreet shows in passages of the poem was meant for them. Her expressions of humility, presumably sincere acknowledgments of inferiority, were directed to recognized literary greats: Du Bartas, her poetic model; Demosthenes; perhaps Virgil; and all ". . . ye high flown quills that soar the skies, / And ever with your prey still catch your praise." Long before Franklin, Bradstreet discovered that one could achieve the appearance of humility (and its rhetorical effect in placating a suspicious audience) by emulating the loftiest models and confessing failure.

Unlike Bradstreet's formal debate poems in which the contenders successively advance their individual cases, "The Prologue" maintains argumentative tension by its deft ordering of assertions and its ambiguous juxtapositions of ideas. Bradstreet develops both cases together, often seeming to capitulate to her opposition. But any male supremacist who read happily along, imagining no threat to his smugness, would eventually find his case pressed to the point of absurdity, while a more alert or ironic reader would be delighted throughout by the poet's cleverness in charming while outwitting her antagonist. If "The Prologue" was intended to win readers for the histories while building affection and respect for the poet, it served its purpose.

Beginning boldly with her echo of Virgil, Bradstreet immediately disclaims her obvious purpose. She had, indeed, written of wars, captains, kings, cities, and commonwealths, though not in the epic strains a reader might expect from one who thought of poesy as "Calliope's own child." Reference to her "obscure lines" could hardly disguise her purpose, at least for any reader with enough foresight to glance ahead into the book. Like Chaucer's "I can namore," this statement deflects attention only slightly from the author's plan to develop the supposedly forsaken topic at great length.

Further developing the sense of authorial humility, Bradstreet moved into a sincere tribute to Du Bartas, still her poetic master. The admiration, however, was that which an aspiring writer of either sex might feel for an established poet. Such expressions of poetic inadequacy to a great theme and inferiority to a major writer were common among authors known to Bradstreet, and there is no reason to interpret her praise as specifically female submissiveness. In his dedicatory verse to *The Tenth Muse*, we should recall, John Woodbridge indited a parallel passage to acknowledge his inability to emulate Bradstreet herself.<sup>9</sup>

What I (poor silly I) prefix therefore,  
Can but do this, make yours admired the more;  
And if but only this I do attain,  
Content, that my disgrace may be your gain.

Praising Du Bartas's choice of subject matter, his "sugared lines," and even his "overflowing store" of verse, Bradstreet—"simple I"—called attention to qualities which she could reasonably hope to imitate according to her skill. And skill is a revealing word, placing emphasis on craftsmanship, which could be developed, rather than natural gifts, which might have been denied. "The Prologue" is itself a display of poetic skill, technically more artful than the histories or quaternions with their monotonous couplets. The stanzaic pattern, the sound effects, and the rhetorical devices of "The Prologue" consistently qualify its author's pretensions to simplicity.

The next stanza sounds more sincerely self-deprecating with its imagery of "broken strings" in a musical instrument and "a main defect" in an aesthetic structure. Bradstreet speaks of her "foolish, broken, blemished Muse" and acknowledges irreparable limitations. People have no right to expect music, she asserts, in cases where nature has denied some essential power.

Yet her next example, Demosthenes, reverses the conclusion drawn in stanza three. Surely a congenital speech impediment seems a natural defect precluding oratorical success. But art, in this case purposeful, concentrated, sustained self-discipline, led first to clarity and then to fluency.

cy and sweetness. With any natural endowment at all, then, Bradstreet shows that an ambitious artist can achieve excellence. Art corrects nature, except for the "weak or wounded brain" which "admits no cure." Readers who divide the poem structurally at this halfway point see the first four stanzas as submissive and self-abasing—especially the final line. Perhaps the statements are self-critical but only in the sense that she submits to the artistic claims of recognized literary masters and recognizes faults in herself which can be corrected through the stylistic apprenticeship on which she has already embarked, as anyone could discover by reading the poems introduced by "The Prologue." Only if she claims the weak and wounded brain as self-description need we interpret this part of the poem as an expression of defeat.

Note, however, that mention of weak and wounded brains leads Bradstreet directly to reflection on carping tongues, which may well articulate idiocy. At this point, she joins battle with her supposed critics and stops comparing herself with writers who deserve her respect. These scolds who would restrict a woman to domestic activities turn out to be contemptuous of thought and imagination in any form—not just when offered by a female wit. They refuse to look at evidence ("If what I do prove well . . ."), and they mistake skill for chance. Confronted with the analogy the Greeks drew between femininity and artistic inspiration as embodied in the Muses, they cut a Gordian knot with their brute disregard for cultural intricacies. Those who say that "The Greeks did nought, but play the fools and lie" demonstrate contempt for fiction and deadness to poetry. They can hardly be the readers she hoped to draw further into her manuscript, but in travesty their claims she might hope to entertain or even impress her proper audience.

In stanza seven Bradstreet spins out the clumsy assertions of her fancied enemies to the extreme limits of logical fallacy. "Let Greeks be Greeks, and women what they are," she begins as if to capitulate gracefully. But Greeks and women need not to be regarded as mutually exclusive categories. Attentive readers, like John Woodbridge, could think of Sappho. The carpers, of course, could drift rapidly along, caught in a tidal wave of ironic concessions. Although it would be "but vain" for women "unjustly to wage war," it might at times be appropriate to rally female energies in justified aggression. The poet who seems to be calming tensions here and promising peace is the same author who later in *The Tenth Muse* let gracious young New England challenge her dependent mother with a decidedly militant call to arms:<sup>9</sup>

These are the days the Church's foes to crush,  
 To root out Popelings head, tail, branch, and rush;  
 Let's bring Baal's vestments forth to make a fire,  
 Their miters, surplices, and all their tire,  
 Copes, rochets, crosiers, and such empty trash,  
 And let their names consume, but let the flash  
 Light Christendom, and all the world to see  
 We hate Rome's whore with all her trumpery.

Bradstreet completes the logical undoing of her opponents by wheeling in a veritable Trojan Horse to confirm the tentative peace. "Men can do best, and women know it well," she proclaims—right in the prologue to a series of history poems which will parade before her readers an astounding chronicle of disasters, defeats, and depravities involving both men and women rulers but featuring the generally more powerful males. Although Bradstreet gave greater attention to women rulers in her poems than she found in Raleigh's history, she never attempted to show one sex as morally or even politically superior in the use of power; certainly "The Four Monarchies" rebuts her generalization in "The Prologue," however, and indicates its irony. The crowning joke comes next, when she admits "Preeminence in all and each is yours." By extending claims of male supremacy to all areas of human experience, she seems to dismiss hopes for female excellence in government, oratory, and poetry while acknowledging male dominion in everything: presumably even needlework and childbearing.

This apparent capitulation to the irrational claims of her imagined critics violates common sense, of course, and conflicts as well with the argumentative pattern of the quaternions in which each element, humor, age, and season admits weaknesses as well as strengths. The resolution of these conflicts comes from a recognition of complementary functions, from awareness of multiple contributions to a final desired unity.<sup>10</sup> The same reasoning characterizes Bradstreet's marriage poems, where husband and wife appear as mutually dependent and supportive partners. To restrict women from literature, then, or even from historical narration would be folly. The battle of the sexes, like the debates of the elements and humors, should never be won.

After this deft lobotomy of weak or wounded brains, Bradstreet concludes "The Prologue" with a modest but confident declaration of her literary hopes. In the final stanza she invokes the world's great writers in lines which themselves fly and flash with the eloquence of her praise. The masters soaring in the heavens may see her lines as "lowly," but she gives no indication that earthbound readers need concur. In comparison to a poet like Du Bartas or a rhetorician like Demosthenes, she is limited but hardly worthless. Her "mean and unrefined ore"

highlights their "glistering gold" and may, with time, be enhanced by careful polishing.

The most striking image in this paean, however, is surely that of the "thyme or parsley wreath" Bradstreet requests in recognition of her poetry, discounting the traditional bay laurel. It seems a humble request: substitution of a kitchen herb for richer foliage. Bay leaves are also herbs, however, and there are cooks who plunge all three in the same aromatic pot. As far as honor goes, there may be less distinction here than the phrasing suggests. Elizabeth Wade White points out that thyme symbolized vitality and courage for the Greeks and that they sometimes honored athletes or dead heroes with the "fadeless foliage" of parsley wreaths.<sup>11</sup> Even more familiar was the mythical background of the laurel as a symbol of poetry. In his verses "Upon Mrs. Anne Bradstreet Her Poems, Etc." prefaced to *The Tenth Muse*, John Rogers commended the Puritan poet for her avoidance of the wantonly lascivious topics provided by classical literature, specifically mentioning "How sage Apollo, Daphne hot pursues." C.B., in his introductory quatrain, wrote: "I cannot wonder at Apollo now, / That he with female laurel crowned his brow."<sup>12</sup> The laurel crown commemorated Daphne, who was protectively transformed in her flight from lusty Apollo; so the bay leaves provided a female crown for male poets. The modesty that kept Anne Bradstreet from claiming such an honor, then, may have been more nearly allied to chastity than to humility. She may have felt sensitive to the mythic presentation of woman as simultaneously the object and victim of the god of poetry and the sign of glory for his disciples. It is clear, at any rate, that the concluding stanza expresses personal self-assurance as a poet, and the reader who has followed the stylistic, rhetorical, and logical devices by which she guides "The Prologue" from acknowledgment of her defects to assertion of her triumph is likely to accept the claim. Like Emily Dickinson, who contrasted "Carbon in the Coal" with "Carbon in the Gem" as queenly ornaments, Anne Bradstreet contrived to sound meek and vulnerable, even in the act of choosing among crowns.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Analyses of "The Prologue" and commentaries on its tone may be found in several recent books: Ann Stanford, *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan* (New York, 1974); Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin, Tex., 1977); Elizabeth Wade White, *Anne Bradstreet: "The Tenth Muse"* (New York, 1971). Jeannine Hensley also explores the issue in her introduction to *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). Robert D. Arner analyzes "The Prologue" as part of his essay on "The Structure of Anne Bradstreet's *Tenth Muse*," in *Discoveries & Considerations: Essays on Early American Literature & Aesthetics Presented to Harold Jantz*, ed. Calvin Israel (Albany, N.Y., 1976), pp. 46-66.

<sup>2</sup> All citations of "The Prologue" in this essay refer to *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> From Peacham's dedicatory epistle to Sir John Puckering, in *The Garden of Eloquence*, ed. William G. Crane (1593; facsimile rpt. Gainesville, Fla., 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Rosamund Rosenmeier, "Divine Translation: A Contribution to the Study of Anne Bradstreet's Method in the Marriage Poems," *Early American Literature*, 12 (1977), 121-35. In *God's Altar: The World and the Flesh in Puritan Poetry* (Berkeley, 1978), Robert Daly finds similar evidence of Bradstreet's figural language and carefully controlled tone in poems which maintain a balance between temporal and eternal values

<sup>5</sup> Stanford, *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan*, p. 68

<sup>6</sup> I have explored argumentative patterns in these four debate poems in "The 'Unrefined Ore' of Anne Bradstreet's Quaternions," *Early American Literature*, 9 (1974), 19-26.

<sup>7</sup> Jeannine Hensley, "Anne Bradstreet's Wreath of Thyme," Introduction to *Works*, p. xxx

<sup>8</sup> "To My Dear Sister, The Author of These Poems," *Works*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> "A Dialogue Between Old England and New," *Works*, p. 186, ll. 236-43.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Anne Hildebrand, "Anne Bradstreet's Quaternions and 'Contemplations,'" *Early American Literature*, 8 (1973), 118.

<sup>11</sup> White, *Anne Bradstreet: "The Tenth Muse,"* p. 241.

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, pp. 10, 7.