

American literature

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The Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor are widely known figures in early American literature. Common assumption persists that Bradstreet, a Puritan woman, mother, wife, and renowned poet, was the more radical of the two poets and that Taylor, who was both a pastor and a physician, expressed a more rigid and traditional devotion to Puritan religious and philosophical principles.

In fact, a close inspection of even single examples of each poet's work demonstrates an almost opposite conclusion: Bradstreet, despite the unconventionality of her dual status as a Puritan wife and also as a publically known poet, represented a solidly Puritan conventionality which had a notable -- arguably derogatory -- impact on her poetry.

In final analysis, it was Taylor, not Bradstreet, who actually embodied a verifiable radicalism in his poetry.

This radicalism is by far more evident from an aesthetic point of view than from a religious or moral point of view; however, as this paper will illustrate, Taylor's poetic techniques and themes do reveal a degree of, perhaps unconscious, radicalism in a philosophical or religious sense. On the other hand, no such radicalism is evident in the works of Bradstreet whose poems serve both traditional theme and form.

To discover the roots of Bradstreet's aesthetic conventionality it is necessary to look no further than to the social mores of her time: " A New England woman of Anne Bradstreet's time could have been censured for becoming known even as a poet".

(Requa 3) so in order to be perceived as anything less than a total radical it was essential that Bradstreet resort to traditional forms and themes and an accepted idiom in order that her work be read at all. In addition to adopting a less-than-radical technique and voice, Bradstreet found it important to minimize her artistic life: " she wrote poetry only in her legitimately idle hours [...] and that she did not intend to publish the poems" (Requa 3).

In addition to the restrictions placed upon her as a woman writing poetry in Puritan America, Bradstreet was restricted by the Puritan ethical vision and its religious severity itself, regardless of being a woman: " the Puritan aesthetic restricted the Puritan poet.

He could not surrender himself to sensual delights, and the code of the plain style would apply to his rhythms as well as to his prose" (Miller 265); because Bradstreet remained faithful to this Puritan aesthetic in her poetry, any radicalism in her expression would be found, not in technique, but in theme.

However, Bradstreet also adopted conventional themes while living a quite conventional life: " she raised a large family and[...] wrote a series of long, recondite poems on such conventional subjects as the seasons and the four monarchies. These are competent, cultured, though to our taste a bit stiff" (Miller 265).

So whether writing in what appears to be a personal or domestic setting theme, Bradstreet is actually still writing very " public" poems; her " occasional lyrics, inspired by the native setting or the homely incidents of her daily life, show that a Puritan could further combine piety with sexual

passion, love of children and good furniture, humor" (Miller 266) but nowhere is there evident a truly confessional or radical theme or context of expression in Bradstreet's poetry.

The most radical aspect of the poetry seems, in fact, not to have a connection to theme or technique but in the inspiration by which Bradstreet enabled herself to embrace a very difficult vocation. The radicalism of Bradstreet is in the nature of her poetic inspiration rather than articulation:

the same woman who, having been too occupied with house affairs to keep a diary, bequeathed to her children these Meditations, which she composed, she says, " when my soul hath been refreshed with consolations which the world knows not."

(Miller 275)

A good example of how Bradstreet actually avoids radicalism of theme or language or image or even meter and form while simultaneously translating a personal event to a public reiteration of conventional vision and ideas is her poem " Verses upon the Burning of our House."

In this poem , Bradstreet takes what is ostensibly a very personal tragedy and transforms the confessional elements of the poem to Puritan edicts and platitudes.

The poem is straightforward in conventional prosody: " In silent night when rest I took,/ For sorrow near I did not look,/ I waken'd was with thund'ring noise/ And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice." (Miller 273) For the modern reader it is simply inconceivable to try to imagine a more banal set of lines.

The poem does little to change its monotony of rhythm, rhyme, and reduces what must have been a tremendously upsetting personal experience to a set or predictable Puritan platitudes.

This demonstrates clearly that not only was Bradstreet a traditionalist in poetic technique, but she was a devout Puritan, leaning on her beliefs in a time of crisis. The poem, of course, progresses in a very linear fashion toward its concluding (end-stop rhyme) moral: " Farewell, my self; farewell, my store./The world no longer let me love;/My hope and Treasure lies above." (Miller 273)

If radicalism is utterly lacking in Bradstreet's poetry, it is evident to an obvious degree in the poetic compositions of Edward Taylor. The nature of Taylor's themes are not necessarily radical on the surface -- he, like Bradstreet, writes with an obvious reliance on and genuine belief in Puritan religious, ethical, and philosophical principles.

On the other hand, Taylor, unlike Bradstreet can hardly be regarded as a traditionalist it comes to poetic technique. In fact, the radical nature of his figurative language is -- to this day -- still surprising and often almost shocking.

The nature of the surprise element in Taylor's poetry emerges from his unique coupling of the Divine and the banal -- or even the offensive, as in : " Meditation 8, [...] when he writes that " Gods Tender Bowells run/ Out streams of Grace" (Reed).

What is problematic -- and hence radical -- in Taylor's welding of banal or even grotesque images with the Divine is that " Taylor's conceits and

metaphors seem to lower the divine or even to demean the divine" (Reed) even when such assumptions are clearly refuted by the theme of the poems, and the quite traditional adherence to Puritan religiosity which is manifest in Taylor's work.

A fine example of Taylor's radicalism with metaphor stands in odd but harmonious aesthetic relationship to traditional Puritan morals and ideas is Taylor's poem "Meditation Six" which concludes with this couplet: "Then I shall be thy Money, thou my Hoard:/ Let me thy Angell bee, bee thou my Lord." (Taylor 127)

It requires little imagination to envision how such a conceit: viewing God as a "hoard" and money as a spiritual quantity of goodness would have been met by Taylor's contemporaries. Even the modern reader has no problem feeling the dynamic radicalism inherent in Taylor's figurative language. Lines such as: "Be thou my Spectacles that I may read/Thine Image and Inscription stamp on mee."

(Taylor 127) still shock the modern reader with their seemingly natural association of the mundane with the Divine. Other images like "Lord, make my Soule thy Plate" (Taylor 127) are so radically innovative that they still stand up to modern technology.

In addition to the experimentalism and radical nature of Taylor's metaphorical expression, it is possible that his poems express and even deeper, more futuristic instinct toward psychological confessionality: "Taylor's conceits and metaphors[...] could easily be an expression of Oedipal energy." (Reed).

In this fashion, it could be argued that Taylor's "reduction" of Divine concepts to a metaphorical marriage to the mundane actually comprised a radical departure from Puritan faith; however, there is nothing to suggest that Taylor was, himself, aware of the psychological interpretation of the poems and they, like Bradstreet's poems, were intended to express very traditional Puritan beliefs and ideas.

The aspect of the poems which is verifiably radical is an aesthetic radicalism and not a religious or philosophical radicalism. Taylor's innovative idiom was meant to convey classical ideas just as Bradstreet's pedestrian idiom was meant to convey traditionally Puritan ideas.

In conclusion, while there is nothing evidently radical about Bradstreet's aesthetic or thematic approach to poetry, the very act of her being a known, working poet in Puritan new England remains as radical a gesture as it seems she would have been comfortable making even had social edict and the religious prejudices and constraints of her day permitted her to make a full expression of her beliefs.

The modern reader, encountering Bradstreet, encounters a truly Puritan mind but it is not the caricature of a mind but a full, warm, human intellect and emotional resonance which is restrained and dignified by her formality and acquiescence to convention.

For Bradstreet, poetry represented "consolations" and it is this regard that she can be viewed as a genuinely radical and visionary person.

To regard the nature of her poetic gift as a true blessing and not a curse and to find within Puritan society a balance between her public and personal life,

her artistic inspiration and her utterly conventional religious convictions was a truly radical gesture and accomplishment.

By contrast, Edward Taylor succeeded in developing a truly radical form of poetic expression and can be said to have created as much aesthetic radicalism as could be achieved by a poet who worked in his spare time and was, by all accounts, not formally trained.

The idiom which Taylor created is, indeed, radical for its unification of the divine and the banal, but the radicalism of Taylor's poetry ends precisely where it begins: at the level of pure technique. Only by arguing for a slight thread of psychoanalytical interpretation can a case be made that Taylor's themes or religious ideas are in any way radical.

Works Cited

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