

Flaws are only Parchment Deep:

How Form and Biographical Features Shape Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book"

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Amel Bensalim wrote her essay on Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book" for Close Reading, a course that focuses on the relationship of form and meaning in poetry and other genres. As Amel's essay so clearly demonstrates, any reading of form cannot and should not be divorced from the context in which a given work is produced. Deftly attesting to a reciprocity of style and substance that complicates Bradstreet's lament, the essay points to some of the ways the poet's affection for her literary offspring is made visible in a work otherwise intent on expressing the "shame and guilt" inevitable in a social and religious milieu that frowned on women even writing poetry, let alone publishing it. Bradstreet's book may take the metaphorical form of an errant and "hobbling" child whose face needs scrubbing but, as Amel argues, it is one yet firmly contained within the "rigid form" of the poet's well-wrought heroic couplets. Bradstreet's "rambling brat" may yet need mothering, but the essay makes it clear that both child and book remain firmly within their creator's control.

—Dr. Lyn Bennett

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth did'st by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call.
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would

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Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I washed they face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save homespun cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars may'st thou roam.
In critic's 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.
(Anne Bradstreet, *The Author to Her Book*)

In her 1678 poem "The Author to Her Book," Anne Bradstreet confronts one of her own books, a work she considers to be flawed and unworthy of publication. While a self-deprecating authorial voice is interesting enough, the poem becomes even more compelling when placed in its biographical context. The poem illustrates Bradstreet's reaction to her brother-in-law publishing her book without permission. Bradstreet likens her book to an illegitimate child, and an awareness of her Puritan beliefs and the Puritan views of illegitimate children offers readers a more dimensional view of her feelings. Bradstreet's constrained belief system is reflected in the poem's constrained heroic couplets, which are very unlike its frantic contents. These contrasting elements, all viewed in light of her Puritan background, come together to convey complex feelings of shame and guilt, but also a

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yearning for perfection and a fleeting affection toward her book.

When reading Bradstreet's poem, it is important to consider her background and beliefs, namely the ostensibly non-consensual publishing of her work and her Puritan upbringing. That said, the contents of the poem are revealing in and of themselves. The title, "The Author to Her Book," suggests that Bradstreet is directly addressing the unauthorized publication. She starts by calling it the "ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" (Bradstreet 1), a statement which initiates the metaphor that runs through the poem. The book is referred to as a living child who was "snatched" (Bradstreet 3) away, presumably by her brother-in-law. The poem focuses more on her feelings toward her book than her brother-in-law's specific transgressions. Bradstreet balks at the idea that this ill-formed child was exposed to public view "where errors were not lessened" because "all may judge" (Bradstreet 6). The poem then turns and focuses on how difficult it was for Bradstreet to deal with and fix the book/child once it was back in her possession. Her embarrassment is expressed through her "blushing" (Bradstreet 7), and she promptly "cast [the book/child] by" (8). But the maternal pull proves too strong, and Bradstreet finds herself drawn back to the book/child. Her efforts to improve the look of it only made it more flawed. The line "if for thy Father asked, say thou hadst none" (22) shows that Bradstreet considered her book comparable to an illegitimate child.

Illegitimate children and miscarriages were popular topics in Bradstreet's time, as Lisa Day-Lindsey explains in her article "Bradstreet's The Author to Her Book" (67). Bradstreet's description of the book/child's defects are reminiscent of Puritan writers' descriptions of miscarriages (Day-Lindsey 67). For instance, throughout the poem Bradstreet uses the epithets such as "rambling brat," "irksome," "defect[ed face]," and "hobbling" and others to emphasize the deformation of her offspring. In her time, local Puritan authorities wrote colourfully and at length about the abnormality and monstrousness of stillborn babies (Day-Lindsey 66-67). Furthermore, the line "If for thy Father asked, say thou hadst none" (Bradstreet 22) further reflects Puritan values, as leading Puritan authorities of her day laid all blame for unwanted pregnancies or miscarriages on the mothers and midwives, but not on any men who were undoubtedly involved. Bradstreet thus attaches the disgrace associated with illegitimate children to her book. This allows her to express her anxiety regarding the possible social repercussions of having an illegitimate child. According to Day-Lindsey, one "could have been charged with heresy for creating something that did not meet with the approval of the Puritan elders" (68). Bradstreet writes, "I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, / Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet" (Bradstreet 15-16). These lines can be read in different ways: taken literally, she is describing the physical pulling and mending of a child's uneven limbs. Metaphorically, this suggests "stretching" a line of

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poetry to fire the metrical “feet” (Bradstreet 15). In both cases, there is a sense of trying to create a presentable image or make a book/child that is acceptable to the public. She explicitly mentions that “in better dress to trim thee was [in her] mind” (17) and to “beware” of “critic’s hands” (20). A yearning for acceptance and normality runs through the poem, and is even hinted at by the very form of the poem.

“The Author to Her Book” is a poem best read aloud: although written in iambic pentameter heroic couplets, it is the simple diction rather than the metre that makes the poem so rhythmic. In the seventeenth century, during which Bradstreet lived, heroic couplets were most commonly found in epic poetry; in fact, it was during the seventeenth century that they were named “heroic” couplets (Furniss and Bath 57). Both iambic pentameter and heroic couplets were considered the most rigid types of rhythm and metre, and the couplets were even called “closed couplets” (Furniss and Bath 57). In her poem, Bradstreet emphasizes the desire to improve her book/child and achieve some level of acceptability amid rigid Puritan and poetic ideals. In this way, the form of the poem reflects her yearning, which is unrealized in the content itself. Many of the lines that speak about fixing the book/child are written in simple, mostly monosyllabic words that allow for a very even distribution of beats per line. In other words, the lines that express her desire to conform are perfect examples of well-written iambic pentameter. Her desire for her book to fit into the stiff

Puritan mold is reflected in the stiff form of the poem itself. For instance, all the words in the lines "in better dress to trim thee was my mind" (Bradstreet 17) and "and take thy way where yet thou art not known" (21) discuss public appearance in a straightforward, rhythmic manner. It is easy for one to overlook such lines due to their simplicity, but their content is vital to the poem.

The stiff form contrasts the poem's hectic content. All the lines end with a stop (either a comma or a period) except line 12: "Yet being mine own, at length affection would / Thy blemishes amend, if so I could" (Bradstreet 12-13). The frantic feelings lines 12-13 evoke run through the lines that follow, all of which highlight the blemishes she tried to amend in the book/child. Bradstreet writes, "I washed thy face, but more defects I saw, / And rubbing off the spot sill made a flaw" (Bradstreet 13-14). The figurative devices used further strengthen the frenzied nature of the poem. The way Bradstreet goes from small endeavours like "washing" to "stretch[ing] thy joints" (15) is an example of *auxesis*, which is when words are arranged in a sequence of increased force or magnitude and give the reader a sense of amplifications and escalation. The title itself, "The Author to Her Book," tells the reader that Bradstreet is apostrophizing her book, and in the poem she refers to her book as though it were a living child. Of course, the extremely close association between book and child, and her occasional animosity towards her work/child, contribute to the sense of mania and frenzy in the poem. The interplay between the content's urgency to conform

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and the poem's rigid form create an anxious and restless tone. The rigid form presents an ideal structure and reflects how much Bradstreet yearned to perfect her book/child. The hectic content shows the reader how anxiously and impatiently she fruitlessly strove to do just that. Knowing biographical facts surrounding her brother-in-law's non-consensual publication of her work and the importance of appearances in her Puritan environment, the poem's perfection imperative becomes even more potent.

It is unclear whether Bradstreet's brother-in-law published her work maliciously or if he was merely prodigiously thoughtless, but it is clear how Bradstreet felt about it. Her poem "The Author to Her Book" relates those feelings via her thoughts and actions towards her book, which she perceived as imperfect and flawed. It is telling that she chose to associate her feelings with the Puritan perception of illegitimate children. Such an association implies she felt guilty and ashamed of her book and struggled with improving it. Despite her anxious fretting over the book, the poem is written in constrained heroic couplets and iambic pentameter. The form reflects the ideal she wishes her book to conform to, which is derived from her Puritan upbringing. In other words, there is a dissonance between the inadequacy expressed in the content and the perfect adherence to some of the English language's most constrained and elite poetic forms and metres. Thus, the poem also projects a desire to conform or attain acceptance. The content, form, and biographical context of the poem lead one to see the anxiety and

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uncertainty Bradstreet conveys in her poem "The Author to Her Book."

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