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To what extent do the writings of Anne Bradstreet respond to the political and religious concerns of seventeenth-century England?

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The transgressive writings of Anne Bradstreet provocatively engage in political and religious debates and dilemmas of seventeenth-century England despite her emigration to Massachusetts in 1630. However, Bradstreet's work remained devoid of contemporary criticism towards women's engagement in supposedly masculine discourses through an astute façade of conformity to the Puritan doctrine of dichotomous and unnegotiable gender roles. Disputing claims that Bradstreet's poems are 'not discernibly spiritual' and are 'disappointing in [their] impersonal attempts at objectivity',[1] this essay intends to analyse Bradstreet's writings in their subjective and contradictory attitudes towards the female license to address consequential events of the period, including troubling Puritan predicaments and the English Civil War of 1642-1651, as well as the subsequent execution of Charles I in 1649. Through these analyses, it becomes evident that subtle dissents concealed within the self-deprecative overtones of 'The Prologue' become increasingly apparent through an advocation of female empowerment in poems such as 'In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth, of Most Happy Memory' and through the disdain expressed towards male sovereignty in the parliamentarian rhetoric of 'A Dialogue between Old England and New, Concerning their Present Troubles, Anno 1642', 'The Four Monarchies' and 'David's Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1 :19',[2] and also through a questioning of Puritan doctrine in 'To My Dear and Loving Husband'.[3] Ultimately, however, Bradstreet repositions her writing safely within the passive domestic sphere in which it was initially professed to reside, thus averting the critical eye and shielding her from the distressing concern of ostracization.

Bradstreet's compelling self-deprecative rhetoric throughout *The Tenth Muse* indicates a purposeful distancing from the ostensibly immensely complex realm of political and religious concerns in seventeenth-century England. The claims of inadequacy are a likely product of contemporary patriarchal notions of dichotomous public and private, and male and female, spheres respectively, as John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts, expressed that women who gave themselves 'wholly to reading and writing' suffered a 'sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason' as they did not assume 'the place God

[1] Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 30; Jane Eberwein, 'Civil War and Bradstreet's "Monarchies"', *Early American Literature*, 26:2 (1991), 119-144 (p. 120).
[2] Anne Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* (1650)', in *Women Poets of the English Civil War*, ed. by Sarah Ross and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 32-74.
[3] Anne Bradstreet, 'To My Dear and Loving Husband', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43706/to-my-dear-and-loving-husband> [accessed 22 March 2022].

had set for them'.[4] The reference to God here is notable as it serves to convey the significance of Puritan ideology in dictating the gender roles of New England – for Bradstreet to have spoken about political and religious concerns, therefore, would have been deemed, to some degree, blasphemous. The fear was not only punishment in the afterlife, however, but also punishment by the Massachusetts government itself. In 1637, John Winthrop prosecuted and banished the preacher Anne Hutchinson for teaching 'her interpretation of the Puritan doctrine to the magistrates'.[5] Thus, it is not surprising that Bradstreet 'made every effort to meet the expectations of her family and community' both in her life and in her writing.[6]

In the opening line of 'The Prologue' to *The Tenth Muse*, Bradstreet illustrates this seeming obedience to gender norms by immediately setting forth a self-effacing tone in clarifying that her writings aim not to intrude upon male subjects 'of wars, of captains, and of kings,/Of cities founded, commonwealths begun', which, Bradstreet claims, 'for [her] mean pen are too superior things'.[7] In this line, the employment of the synecdoche 'pen' alongside the belittling adjective 'mean' essentially euphemise Bradstreet's self-declared ignorance and substandard intellect, immediately ameliorating fears of female transgression into supposedly male-oriented debates in religion and politics through its suggestion of inherent female intellectual inferiority. However, Bradstreet's admission of her inabilities is perhaps not as sincere as it may initially appear when the potential tone of sarcasm and patronisation is considered. Whilst Patricia Pender suggests that 'Anne Bradstreet's professions of inadequacy […] make her exemplary of the modesty we have come to expect of early modern women writers',[8] it was perhaps not 'modesty' that was truly intended. In the lines 'let poets and historians set these forth,/My obscure verse shall not so dim their worth',[9] Bradstreet suggests that the underlying fear behind the agitations of female voices in literature is that they will outshine those of men and thus 'dim their worth', a notion is further highlighted in the lines, 'And O, you high-flown quills that soar the skies […] This mean and unrefined ore of mine/Will make your glist'ring gold but more to shine',[10] which emphasises the concept that only a 'mean and unrefined ore' of a woman could prevent the attenuation of men. In fact, the metonym of 'high-flown quills' here is not only humorously hyperbolic, but also derogatory through the interpretation of 'high-flown' as merely pompously conceited. To only further accentuate the commendably daring, yet simultaneously submissive, stance of Bradstreet in these lines, the direct address to male critics through the employment of second person serves to heighten the condescension as Bradstreet infantilises her critics in stating that they need not worry of potential competition. This claim can be deemed extremely ironic when considering the subversive attitudes subtly embedded in the poem: 'From my schoolboy's tongue, no rhetoric we expect'. The metaphor of 'schoolboy's tongue' here, in its self-slighting manner, perhaps distracts the reader from the seemingly less significant word 'expect', which invites the interpretation that inadequacy of female writers is

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[4] Adrienne Rich, 'Anne Bradstreet and her Poetry', in *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. by Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), p. xiv.
[5] Emily Warn, 'Anne Bradstreet: "To My Dear and Loving Husband"', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69434/anne-bradstreet-to-my-dear-and-loving-husband> [accessed 22 March 2022].
[6] Martin, *An American Triptych*, p. 30.
[7] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 32, ll. 1-3.
[8] Patricia Pender, 'Rethinking Authorial Reluctance in the Paratexts to Anne Bradstreet's Poetry', in *Early Modern Women and the Poem*, ed. by Susan Wiseman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 165.
[9] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', pp. 32-33, ll. 5-6.
[10] Ibid., p. 33, ll. 43-47.

but a mere expectation, and thus has the potential to be utterly debased. Despite these interpretations of implicit ridiculing and indicative rebelling, the initial reception of the poem expressed little concern for English critics, who simply believed that 'she mobilises discourses of feminine inadequacy',[11] indicating the success of Bradstreet's feigned subservience to patriarchal ideology.

The distribution of Bradstreet's publication played a crucial role in this contemporary unperturbed reception, as the indication that Bradstreet had no intention of publishing her poetry publicly eliminated the perception that she proposed transgress into the public sphere, which would have been an unthinkable act, as Nancy Wright notes, 'in seventeenth-century New England as in Renaissance Europe and England, public speech and writing were sources of fame, an honour deemed appropriate for men and not women. Infamy rather than fame commonly attached to the reputation of women who asserted a public voice'.[12] Bradstreet was able to avoid this 'infamy' as her brother-in-law John Woodbridge was ostensibly solely responsible for the circulation of her publication – a decision made to prevent piracy of the original manuscript: 'I found that divers had gotten some scattered papers, affected them well, and were likely to have sent forth broken pieces, to the author's prejudice, which I thought to prevent'.[13] Bradstreet's addressal to critics of a wider audience, made evident through phrases such as 'If e're you deign these lowly lines your eyes',[14] however, challenge the claim that her poetry was intended for only private circulation. Thus, perhaps an 'indirect approach', as Wendy Martin argues, was merely 'a practical way to circumvent the accusation of excessive ambition'.[15] Therefore, as Martin notes that 'the issue of power and powerlessness is the central concern of Bradstreet's first volume of poetry',[16] I argue that fundamentally, Bradstreet found power in her façade of powerlessness itself.

Bradstreet's continual praise of powerful female figures throughout *The Tenth Muse* serves to highlight her seeming desire to subvert the Puritan gender regulations that would prevent her from engaging in religious and political debates. This praise is most apparent in the elegy 'In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth, of Most Happy Memory'. In this poem, Bradstreet curiously employs heroic couplets, which were traditionally used in poems of war and politics, thus immediately placing Elizabeth into the public sphere - an apt decision when considering Elizabeth's continual disobedience of female gender roles highlighted throughout the poem. For instance, in the lines, 'No phoenix pen, no Spenser's poetry,/No Speed's nor Camden's learned history.',[17] Bradstreet conveys Elizabeth's pre-eminence over prominent and celebrated male figures, a notion highlighted through the anaphora of 'no' alongside the asyndeton, resulting in a sense of endless listing of male inferiors. This would dispute Martin's statement that Bradstreet employed elegies to reinstate Puritan gender roles: 'The contrast between Bradstreet's elegies for her mother and father dramatize the different roles that Puritan women and men were expected to play in their society. Dorothy Yorke was praised for being lovable, charitable, long-suffering and a good moral example to her children while Thomas Dudley was revered for being forthright,

[11] Pender, 'Rethinking Authorial Reluctance in the Paratexts to Anne Bradstreet's Poetry', p. 166.
[12] Nancy Wright, 'Epitaphic Conventions and the Reception of Anne Bradstreet's Public Voice', *Early American Literature*, 31:3 (1996), 243-263 (p. 246).
[13] Pender, 'Rethinking Authorial Reluctance in the Paratexts to Anne Bradstreet's Poetry', p. 175.
[14] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 33, l. 45.
[15] Martin, *An American Triptych*, p. 37.
[16] Martin, *An American Triptych,* p. 38.
[17] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 69, ll. 19-20.

determined, patriotic, and principled'.[18] In fact, these latter qualities attributed to Thomas Dudley can be found in Elizabeth's description, as she is noted to be 'so good, so just, so learned, so wise;/From all the kings on earth she won the prize […] She hath wiped off th' aspersion of her sex'.[19] Through a direct challenge to male pride and power, Bradstreet demonstrates unquestionably, although anachronistically, feminist qualities. It is likely that this proto-feminism enabled Bradstreet to question kingship and religious values in her writing.

This engagement in religious discourses of the period is particularly evident in 'To My Dear and Loving Husband'. On the surface, Bradstreet's supposedly intimate love poem conforms to contemporary attitudes such as the treatment of marriage as a transaction, made evident through the lexical field of monetary exchange in lines such as, 'I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold'.[20] A subversion occurs, however, through the speaker's comments on religion, which are clearly not addressed to her husband alone when considering the phrase 'ye women'.[21] Bradstreet proceeds to address her stance in what Edmund Morgan calls 'the Puritan dilemma', wherein 'the Puritan was always trying to achieve a balance between this world and the next' by attempting to stabilise 'the fallibility of material existence and the infallibility of the spiritual'.[22] In stating that 'Thy love is such I can no way repay;/The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray', Bradstreet suggests that indulgence in earthly love results in heavenly reward, disputing the Puritan belief that 'through constant scrutiny of the emotions and self-denial, the heart is gradually weaned from earthly desire', enabling 'a man to devote his life to seeking salvation'.[23] By instructing that 'while we live, in love let's so persever',[24] therefore, Bradstreet seemingly advocates religious nonconformity by challenging the Puritan teaching that one must 'withdraw from the world [and take] heart from the knowledge that they were on route to a better world', as noted by John Spurr,[25] which cannot be deemed surprising in light of Bradstreet's own admission of religious doubt: 'I came into this Country, where I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose'.[26] The supposed love poem thus serves to express and perhaps advocate Bradstreet's own unique Puritan stance, and does so with a tone of confidence, established by a series of end-stopped lines at the start: 'If ever two were one, then surely we./If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.',[27] as well as the increased grandeur of writing in the final four lines, which is illustrated by the caesura between action and result and strengthened by the dual meaning of 'persever', which simply encourages a continuation of love on one level, but indicates that love enables one to stay in a state of grace when interpreted in its theological context. However, the amphibrach followed by two iambs in the line 'the heavens reward thee manifold, I pray' suggests a hesitation, through which Bradstreet was perhaps recoiling her tone of confidence to avoid criticisms in light of her claims in 'The Prologue' that 'women [should be] what they are'.[28] In this way, Bradstreet

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[18] Martin, *An American Triptych*, pp. 29-30.
[19] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 70, ll. 25-29.
[20] Bradstreet, 'To My Dear and Loving Husband', l. 5.
[21] Ibid, l. 4.
[22] Robert Richardson, 'The Puritan Poetry of Anne Bradstreet', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 9:3 (1967), 317-331 (pp. 317-318).
[23] Ibid., p. 318.
[24] Bradstreet, 'To My Dear and Loving Husband', l. 11.
[25] John Spurr, *English Puritanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p.5.
[26] Martin, *An American Triptych*, p. 20.
[27] Bradstreet, 'To My Dear and Loving Husband', ll. 1-2.
[28] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 33, l. 37.

avoids the criticisms that would accompany a decision to comment on religious affairs through fluctuations in her tone of confidence and the concealment of a private and intimate love poem that disguises her encouragements of religious nonconformity.

Bradstreet's comments on political affairs, on the other hand, are not so subtle. In 'A Dialogue Between Old England and New, Concerning their Present Troubles', Bradstreet openly comments on the monarchy and the Church, posing the question of why a poet who seemingly tread extremely lightly on male subjects in avoidance of criticism felt it suddenly acceptable to engage in current political discourses. The answer, I argue, lies in the poem's position in the original anthology. 'A Dialogue' is the eighth poem of *The Tenth Muse* and thus follows both 'The Prologue' and 'An Apology', the latter which arguably effeminately victimises Bradstreet; by this point, Bradstreet has continually and humiliatingly confessed her own inadequacies, establishing herself as sufficiently inept to not pose a threat. Bradstreet is thus able to speak of political matters without fear of the critical eye, and it cannot be deemed surprising that she formed strong political opinions when considering the context in which she wrote. As noted by Martin, 'enraged by the abridgement of religious and civil rights and illegal taxes levied by Charles I, a group of beleaguered Puritans, including Anne Bradstreet's father a new husband, formed the New England Company with the intention of emigrating'.[29] The Puritan resentment towards Charles I's controversial reforms and subsequent sympathy towards the parliamentarian cause becomes evident in 'A Dialogue', as, when justifying the suffering and poor condition of Old England, which is explicitly illustrated in the lines, 'my plundered tows, my houses' devastation,/My ravished virgins, and my young men slain', Old England holds responsible her 'sins, the breach of sacred laws./Idolatry, supplanter of a nation/With foolish superstition adoration […] The Pope had hope to find Rome here again'.[30] In these lines, Bradstreet alludes to the Puritan accusation of Charles I associations with Catholicism, a view prompted initially by his marriage to the Catholic Spanish Infanta Maria, and also represents Puritan iconophobia in expressing an issue with idolatry, as Margaret Aston states that 'the violent and radical iconoclasms of the 1640s was […] the culmination of a long ongoing puritan programme'.[31] In fact, Bradstreet provocatively insights that Charles's actions are worse than those of the devil himself in the lines, 'From Belzebub such language hear?/What scorning of saints of the most high?/What injuries did daily on them lie?' These lines convey a persuasively passionate tone through the employment of rhetorical questioning, as Bradstreet aggravates her reader in seeming coercion towards the Puritan cause.

This stance is similarly depicted in 'The Four Monarchies', which, unlike 'A Dialogue', continues to avoid criticism through exposing personal beliefs about faults of the monarchy beneath the façade of a mere tedious recollection of events, as Jane Eberwein argues, 'she approached current disruptions from a prodigiously distant historical remove, always vigilant against exposing views that might have drawn opprobrium upon herself for venturing into areas beyond her sphere of womanly authority'.[32] However, what may be perceived as 'vigilant' and 'distant', I suggest, truly had within it the substance of political subjectivity in the royalist-parliamentarian debate, Bradstreet's employment of a monotonous iambic pentameter, for example, perhaps intends to mirror the tediousness of the monarchy itself:

[29] Martin, *An American Triptych*, p. 23.
[30] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', pp. 50-54, ll. 90-197.
[31] Margaret Aston, 'Puritans and Iconoclasm, 1560-1660', in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560-1700*, ed. by Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (New York: Macmillan Education, 1996), p. 109.
[32] Eberwein, 'Civil War and Bradstreet's "Monarchies"', p. 131.

'Great Nimrod dead, Bellus the next, his Son,/Confirms the rule his Father had begun, […] His father dead, Ninus begins his reign, Transfers his seat, to the Assyrian plain'.[33] Critically, in the same way that Charles I is characterised as a poor ruler of England as a result of his 'sins, the breach of sacred laws',[34] the rulers mentioned in 'The Four Monarchies' similarly prove to be consistently inefficacious. Bellus, for example, 'taught the people first to idolise', resembling the sins of Old England in 'A Dialogue', and Ninus was a 'tyrant [that] did his neighbours all oppress'.[35] Significantly, both Bellus and Ninus are male monarchs, whose descriptions contrast strongly with that of Elizabeth in Bradstreet's elegy, indicating a proto-feminist advocation of female empowerment in the political realm.

This sentiment is similarly evident in 'David's Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1:19', wherein Bradstreet questions, 'How did the Mighty fall, and falling die?'.[36] The speaker of the poem implicitly, yet continually, highlights Saul and Jonathan's poor military and leadership qualities throughout the poem: 'The shield of Saul was vilely cast away;/There had his dignity so sore a foil',[37] supporting the interpretation that the poem is 'a reminder of Charles's role in bringing about his own destruction',[38] when parallelised to the loss and execution of Charles I in 1649. Furthermore, in the lines 'Swifter than swiftest eagles were they […] Thy love was wonderful, surpassing man,/Exceeding all the love that's feminine',[39] the use of sibilance serves to slow down the pace of reading and soften the tone, which is the opposite of what one may expect in a poem about battle. Interestingly, this staunchly contrasts the sharp tone that accompanies the description of Elizabeth: 'But time would fail me, so my wit would too,/To tell of half she did, or she could do'.[40] The use of solely monosyllabic words in these lines, as well as the consonance of 'would […] wit would', contrastingly convey the ferocity of Elizabeth's rule, further supporting the notion of Bradstreet's advocation of female empowerment in the political realm.

However, such transgressive comments on political matters in 'The Four Monarchies' ultimately culminate in a reversion back to the safe domestic sphere in which Bradstreet's writing initially claimed to reside. The story of the Roman monarchy is not only abruptly abandoned, but is accompanied by the submissive ending of 'An Apology', which argues that 'the more I mused, the most I was in doubt./The subject large, my mind and body weak'.[41] In these lines, Bradstreet conveys an apparent inability to complete 'what's begun',[42] as a result of what Eberwein has noted to be 'fatigue and discouragements that had impeded attempts'.[43] Ultimately, this 'apology' safely repositions Bradstreet into an inferior position of self-victimisation that is established at the start of *The Tenth Muse*, thus reiterating Bradstreet's claimed conformity to the passive domestic sphere by inviting sympathy for her inabilities rather than condemnations for her strengths.

[33] Bradstreet, 'From *The Tenth Muse*', p. 35, ll. 21-38.
[34] Ibid., p. 50, l. 90.
[35] Ibid., pp. 35-36, ll. 26-49.
[36] Ibid., p. 74, l. 4.
[37] Ibid., p. 74, ll. 14-15.
[38] Ibid., p. 75.
[39] Ibid., p. 75, ll. 23-37.
[40] Ibid., p. 71, ll. 65-66.
[41] Ibid., p. 45, ll. 3443-3444.
[42] Ibid., p. 45, l. 3440.
[43] Eberwein, 'Civil War and Bradstreet's "Monarchies"', p. 119.

Thus, the writings of Anne Bradstreet unquestionably respond to the political and religious concerns of seventeenth-century England behind a consistent guise of purported naivety and ignorance. In light of Puritan dictations on the female role in society, Bradstreet seemingly expresses an ineptness in 'The Prologue' that prevents her intervention in male-dominated discourses. However, upon deeper examination, a condescension towards male writers begins to unfold, initiating the numerous transgressions imbued throughout her writing. The admiration expressed towards Elizabeth's supposedly masculine qualities alongside the typical parliamentarian stance against the pitiful rule of male monarchs indicate a proto-feminist advocation of female empowerment in the political sphere, and Puritan ideology is also brought into question in its encouragement of self-denial and subjugation. Ultimately, Bradstreet's curious insights throughout her poetry disprove her professed incomprehension of political and religious affairs, which serves only as a compelling performance for the reactionary and fragile sentiments of seventeenth-century society.

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