

Critical Analysis of 'The Prologue' by Anne Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Prologue" is a significant work in the history of American literature as it provides insight into the challenges faced by early women writers and their struggle for recognition. Written in the 17th century, Bradstreet's poem is both a defense of her writing and a commentary on gender roles and expectations of her time.

The poem mostly focuses on what the speaker thinks it means for a woman like her to write poems. She starts out by saying that she would not focus on the big subjects of history like kings, or war, or politics, since she is not capable of it. She promises to leave the big subjects to the male writers, since she feels like Nature did not give her (a woman) the ability or perfection to make great art. She also comments that the critics would probably imagine her sewing than writing. She points out (even if she writes good poems, the male critics will just say she stole them. She also reminds her reader that the ancient Greeks worshipped female muses. Finally, she also tells her imagined critics, and the world, that there is no reason for men to feel threatened by female poets. She is not trying to be the best; she just wants her work to be acknowledged for its own worth. She is happy, she tells the reader, to play second fiddle to the male writers, as long as they acknowledge her work.

Key Aspects of the Poem –

Gender and Writing: "The Prologue" begins with Bradstreet acknowledging that she, as a woman, is entering the world of literature traditionally dominated by men. She mentions how women in her society were not encouraged to write, but she is determined to defy these norms and make her voice heard.

Self-Deprecation and Humility: Throughout the poem, Bradstreet employs a self-deprecating tone, describing her work as "poor," "weak," and "unfit." This humility can be seen as a way to deflect criticism and conform to societal expectations of women being modest and unassuming.

Defiance and Ambition: While Bradstreet may downplay her talents, the very act of writing and publishing her poetry is an act of defiance. She asserts her ambition to be a writer, and in doing so, challenges the prescribed roles for women in her time.

Critique of Gender Roles: Bradstreet criticizes the societal limitations placed on women, suggesting that they have the same intellectual potential as men. She argues that women should be allowed to engage in intellectual pursuits and that their creativity should not be stifled.

Use of Metaphor: Bradstreet employs metaphorical language throughout the poem. For example, she compares her writing to a child, emphasizing its potential for growth and development. This metaphor highlights her belief in the value and potential of her work.

Acknowledgment of Male Critics: Bradstreet acknowledges that she expects criticism from male readers and writers. This recognition of potential opposition underscores the gendered challenges she faces as a woman writer.

Religious Themes: Like many of Bradstreet's works, "The Prologue" contains religious themes. She refers to her writing as a "sacrifice," suggesting a sense of devotion to her craft and a desire to use her talent to glorify God.

Legacy and Posterity: Bradstreet expresses her hope that her work will survive and be appreciated by future generations. This demonstrates her desire for her writing to have a lasting impact, despite the limitations placed on her as a woman writer.

Analysis

“To sing of Wars, of Captains, and of Kings,
Of Cities founded, Common-wealths begun,
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.”

In the first stanza of the poem sets the self-deprecating tone and expresses modesty of the speaker. The speaker humbly states that she thinks that she is not capable of writing about grand subjects such as wars, conquest, captains, kings, the founding of cities, and commonwealths. Epic poems typically celebrate the deeds of great heroes and leaders, and they often deal with grand themes and male writers write them. However, the poet accepts that these are “too superior things” for her and considers her pen is inadequate for handling such superior subjects. She suggests that poets and historians should set these subjects forth, and that her “obscure lines” will not diminish their worth. The speaker’s disclaimer suggests that she is aware of these conventions. Therefore, that she does not feel comfortable writing in this tradition. The speaker’s disclaimer reveals her gender. The speaker is a woman, and she is writing in a time when women were not typically considered to be poets and not capable of writing about serious topics. In the past, women were often denied access to formal education, which limited their opportunities for literary pursuits. They were rarely given the same opportunities as men, and their work was often not taken seriously. Many women writers used male pseudonyms or initials to have their works taken seriously, further highlighting the gender bias prevalent in the literary world. By declaring her reluctance to tackle such subjects and leaving them to male poets and historians, it indicates the acknowledgement of the speaker concerning the societal limitations imposed on women’s creative expression. However, the speaker’s self-deprecating remarks about her own writing could be seen as a form of sarcasm. It could be a way for the speaker to criticize the patriarchal norms that undervalued women’s writing during that time period.

The speaker’s use of the word “mean” can have multiple meanings. The word “mean” can mean “insignificant” or “inferior.” On the one hand, she could be acknowledging that her writing is insignificant compared to the work of the great epic poets. On the other hand, she could also be using the word to suggest that the prejudice against women writers is mean. Moreover, the speaker’s use of the word “obscure” to describe her own work can have two meanings. On one hand, the word “obscure” could suggest that her work is not as well-known or as highly regarded as the work of male poets. On the other hand, it could suggest that her writing is hidden from view. This could be a reference to the fact that women writers were often excluded from the literary canon. The speaker’s disclaimer in the first stanza is a complex and nuanced statement. It reflects the speaker’s awareness of the prejudice against women writers, as well

as her own sense of her own limitations. However, it also contains a hint of sarcasm and subversion.

“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.”

The second stanza expresses the speaker’s envy of Du Bartas’s (French poet) writing expresses her frustration at the limitations that she feels as a woman writer. She expresses a sense of wonder and envy when she reads the “sugar’d lines” of Du Bartas. She highlights the reputation and literary stature of Bartas. The term “sugar’d lines” implies that his poetry is beautifully crafted, filled with artistry. She sees his work as superior, and this realization leads to feelings of envy.

The phrase “Fool, I do grudge the Muses did not part / ‘Twixt him and me that over-fluent store” reveals her frustration and jealousy. She perceives herself as a “fool” or stupid in comparison to Bartas. The Muses did not bestow upon her the same level of poetic talent and inspiration. The word “grudge” indicates her discontent and longing for a similar gift from the Muses. The Muses are the goddesses of art and inspiration. The speaker’s reference to the Muses suggests that she believes that women are just as capable of being inspired by the Muses as men are. The main problem is that she is born as a woman. The word “Muses” could also the opportunities that man received to pursue their creative passions. Women, on the other hand, are often discouraged from writing, and their work is often dismissed as being inferior.

The speaker knows that Du Bartas has been given the opportunity to write because he is a man. Bartas, who is representative of male writers, can write what they want but a woman cannot. The Muses have intervened in his writing, and he has been able to achieve great success. The speaker, on the other hand, has not been given the same opportunity. She is a woman, and she is therefore considered to be inferior to men. She acknowledges that Bartas can write as he pleases, free to explore his poetic prowess, while she feels confined by societal expectations and gender roles. Though She acknowledges that her limitations as a woman and she knows that she will never be able to achieve the same level of poetic fluency but she is determined to write to the best of her ability. The speaker’s final line, “But simple I according to my skill,” is a powerful statement of defiance. This acceptance is a sign of strength and resilience. Unlike the grandeur lines of epic poetry or sweet lines of Bartas, her writing can be simple but she will write. In conclusion, the speaker’s expression of wonder and envy towards the poetic talent of male writers like Guillaume Du Bartas highlights the challenges women faced in pursuing literary endeavors during that era. Her self-awareness of societal limitations based on gender reflects the oppressive nature of patriarchy and its impact on female writers of her time.

“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."

The third stanza of the poem is a continuation of the speaker's self-deprecating tone. She compares her poetry to a "School-boy's tongue" and a "broken consort," both of which are considered to be inferior forms of expression. She also says that her Muse is "foolish, broken, and blemished," and that "no Art is able to mend" it. The stanza begins by drawing a parallel between the expectations from a school-boy's tongue and the speaker's own poetic skills. We do not expect sophisticated rhetoric or eloquence from a school-boy's speech. Similarly, the speaker suggests that readers should not expect grand poetic achievements from her.

The next comparison is made between broken strings and her poetic skill. When a musical instrument's strings are broken, it cannot produce the enchanting melodies expected of a sweet consort. Likewise, her verses lack the refinement and grace typically associated with accomplished poetry. Furthermore, just as it is impossible to find perfect beauty when there is a significant defect, the speaker's Muse, representing her creative inspiration, is seen as flawed and lacking brilliance. She accepts her poetic shortcomings and acknowledges that their Muse produces imperfect verses. These comparisons suggest that the speaker believes that her poetry is inferior to the work of male writers. The speaker views her poetic expression as "foolish, broken, blemished," implying that this defect cannot be fixed with "Art." She laments that no "Art" or skill is capable of repairing their Muse's inherent imperfections. This defect is "irreparable" because it is "Nature made." This suggests that the speaker believes that her lack of poetic talent is something that is innate and cannot be rectified through learning or practice.

The stanza's concluding lines emphasize the inability to mend these deficiencies. This suggests that she does not have a high opinion of her own work. In conclusion, the third stanza showcases the poet's humble recognition of their own limitations as a writer. The speaker's self-deprecation reflects the reality of the prejudice against women poets. She is aware that her work will be judged more harshly than the work of male writers, and she is preemptively apologizing for her "defects."

"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."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker alludes to an ancient Greek orator, Demosthenes. He is well-known for his remarkable transformation from having a speech defect to becoming a fluent and eloquent speaker. The speaker begins by comparing herself to the "fluent sweet-tongued Greek," referring to Demosthenes. At first, Demosthenes struggled with a speech impediment, and the term "lisp'd at first" indicates his initial difficulty in speaking clearly. However, through

dedicated effort and perseverance, Demosthenes overcome the obstacle and achieved eloquence in his oratory.

The phrase “in future times speak plain” suggests that over time, Demosthenes honed his speaking abilities to the point where he could communicate clearly and persuasively. This transformation is attributed to Art, meaning the skill and practice he applied to master his oratory. The line “By Art he gladly found what he did seek” emphasizes Demosthenes’ active pursuit of improving his speaking skills. He worked diligently to find what he sought, which was the ability to express himself effectively. The phrase “A full requital of his striving pain” highlights the rewarding outcome of Demosthenes’ efforts. The word “requital” indicates that he received a full compensation or reward for his striving pain, implying that his hard work paid off with great success.

While She acknowledges that Art, in this context, referring to skill and practice, can enhance one’s abilities, but there are inherent limitations. The maxim: “A weak or wounded brain admits no cure.” emphasizes it. If someone has a weak or wounded brain, they may not be able to fully overcome certain obstacles, even with the help of Art. The speaker contrasts her with the example of Demosthenes to underscores her limitations as a poet, suggesting that she lacks the innate ability or potential to reach the heights achieved by a legendary figure like Demosthenes.

“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.”

The fifth stanza highlights the unfair treatment and criticism they face as a female poet. This stanza reveals the societal challenges and biases she encounters in pursuing her literary endeavors. The opening line, “I am obnoxious to each carping tongue,” conveys the speaker’s sense of being disliked by patriarchal figures who habitually find fault. The word “obnoxious” suggests that the speaker is a target of criticism and disapproval, which is likely due to her gender.

This phrase “carping tongues” suggests that the speaker’s critics are constantly finding fault with her work, and that they are motivated by prevalent bias rather than constructive criticism. The speaker’s reference to the needle is also significant. In the 17th century, sewing was seen as a quintessentially feminine activity. By suggesting that her hand “a needle better fits,” the speaker’s critics tell her that she should be content to sew and leave poetry to men. This is a clear example of the gender stereotypes that women poets faced at the time. The phrase “Who says my hand a needle better fits” refers to the prevailing stereotype during the time when this poem was written, which confined women’s roles primarily to domestic tasks such as sewing (using a needle). The criticism aimed at the speaker implies that they should focus on traditional female activities rather than pursuing poetry. This criticism is based on the stereotype that women should be confined to domestic tasks, and that they are not capable of intellectual

pursuits such as poetry. This is a powerful reminder of the challenges that women still face today. Even though we have come a long way in terms of gender equality, there are still many people who believe that women are not as capable as men.

The line “A Poet’s Pen all scorn I should thus wrong” emphasizes that the speaker’s detractors consider it wrong or improper for them to wield a poet’s pen, implying that poetry was seen as a domain reserved for male writers. The speaker’s use of the word “scorn” is also significant. It suggests that the speaker’s detractors not only dismiss her work, but that they also actively look down on her and her abilities. The phrase “For such despite they cast on female wits” indicates that the prejudice is specifically directed at women’s intellectual capabilities and creative talents. The speaker’s use of the word “despite” suggests that the prejudice against female poets is not just based on ignorance, but on a deliberate effort to keep women down.

Even if she writes well or if her poetry proves to be of high quality, it does not change their attitude towards her. The male critics will still claim that the work is either stolen, meaning plagiarized, or it was merely produced by “chance,” undermining the speaker’s genuine talent and hard work. It is not act of talent. The line “If what I do prove well, it won’t advance” highlights the sense of stagnation and lack of progress despite the speaker’s literary achievements. This suggests that the speaker’s critics are not interested in her work on its own merits, but are instead motivated by their own prejudice against women poets. The speaker’s words and phrase in the fourth stanza such as “obnoxious”, “carping tongue”, “scorn” are a powerful indictment of the prejudice and discrimination faced by women poets in a male-dominated literary landscape.

“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.”

In the sixth stanza, the speaker reflects on the perception of women and their role in ancient Greek society. The speaker refers to the Greeks to draw the difference the ancient Greeks compared to the speaker’s contemporary society in their attitude towards women. The word “mild” in line, “But sure the antique Greeks were far more mild,” suggests that the speaker believes that the Greeks were more open-minded and less prejudiced than her own contemporaries in their views towards women. She points out that why the Greeks associated the Muses, who represent creativity and artistic expression, in their myths and literature with women if women have no intellect and creative capabilities. The Muses were traditionally seen as female figures, and they were associated with creativity and artistic expression.

The “nine” refers to the nine Muses, the divine beings of inspiration in Greek mythology, each associated with various arts and sciences. Calliope, one of the Muses, is associated with epic poetry. The speaker’s reference to the Muses suggests that she believes that women are naturally creative and artistic. Though the Greeks did associate the Muses with women, they

also had a long history of misogyny. For example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that women were intellectually inferior to men. However, the speaker's point is still valid. Even though the Greeks had their own prejudices against women, they did at least acknowledge the importance of female creativity and intellect. This is more than can be said for the speaker's own contemporaries, who were often quick to dismiss women poets as being inferior to men. The phrase "But this weak knot they will full soon untie" suggests that the Greeks' perception of women's abilities was a "weak knot," which her contemporaries will soon dismiss as misguided belief that could eventually be untied. The concluding line, "The Greeks did nought but play the fools and lie," emphasizes their statement to perpetuate the gender inequality. They will say that the Greeks are fools and lie.

"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."

In the seventh stanza, the speaker addresses the societal roles of women in society. The stanza acknowledges the prevailing gender hierarchy while advocating for a fair recognition of women's capabilities and contributions. The first line, "Let Greeks be Greeks, and Women what they are," suggests that each group, Greeks (representing men) and women, should be allowed to embrace their respective identities without imposing unfair expectations on one another.

However, she also says that "Men have precedency and still excel," which suggests that she believes that men have an unfair advantage over women. The phrase "still excel" suggests that men are often viewed as superior or excelling in various fields compared to women. The speaker then goes on to say that "It is but vain unjustly to wage war." This suggests that she believes that it is pointless to fight against the traditional gender roles or the established gender hierarchy, but that they should instead focus on excelling in their own sphere. Instead, she argues that women should focus on their own strengths and contributions.

The line "Men can do best, and Women know it well" conveys the understanding that men are generally perceived to be more competent, and women are aware of this perception. This line captures the internalized beliefs and attitudes prevalent during the time when the poem was written. The line "Preeminence in all and each is yours" recognizes that men hold preeminence or superiority in various aspects of life. Yet, the stanza concludes with a request for "some small acknowledgement of ours." This is an appeal for women to receive some acknowledgment and appreciation for their contributions, despite the prevalent gender hierarchy. she believes that women deserve to be recognized for their accomplishments.

The seventh stanza is a powerful statement about the challenges faced by women in a male-dominated world. The speaker acknowledges the traditional gender roles of her time, but she also refuses to give up hope. She believes that women should focus on excelling in their own sphere, and she asks for "some small acknowledgement" of their achievements.

“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.”

In the eighth stanza, the speaker addresses accomplished and celebrated poets and expresses her humble request for recognition from these renowned poets while acknowledging the inherent modesty of their own poetry. The speaker begins the stanza by addressing the “high flown quills” that soar the skies. These quills represent the great poets of the past and present, and they are a reminder of the lofty heights that poetry can reach. The speaker acknowledges that her own poetry is not as lofty as the poetry of these great poets that “soar the skies.”

However, she asks that they “deign these lowly lines your eyes” and give her “thyme or Parsley wreath,” even if they cannot give her the laurel “Bays.” This line expresses her desire for these celebrated poets to take notice of their own “lowly lines.” The use of the term “lowly” indicates the speaker’s modesty and awareness of their own perceived inferiority compared to these renowned poets. The speaker then goes on to say that she asks for “thyme or Parsley wreath,” rather than “Bays.” Thyme and parsley are both herbs that were often used to make wreaths, and they were considered to be less prestigious than laurel wreaths, which were traditionally given to poets. This suggests that the speaker is not seeking the highest form of recognition symbolized by the “Bays” (laurel wreaths), which were traditionally awarded as a symbol of poetic excellence. Instead, the speaker humbly requests a more modest acknowledgment, represented by a “thyme or Parsley wreath.”

The stanza continues with the speaker describing their own poetry as a “mean and unrefined ore.” This simile likens their verses to raw and unprocessed material, highlighting their perceived lack of sophistication compared to the accomplished poets’ polished works. The speaker ends the stanza by saying that her “mean and unrefined ore” can still “make your glist’ring gold but more to shine.” This suggests that her poetry, even though it is not as lofty as the poetry of the great poets, can still add value to their work. It can help to make their poetry shine even brighter. It conveys the belief that the speaker’s simple and unpretentious poetry will enhance and emphasize the brilliance of the esteemed poets’ verses, much like how unrefined ore makes glistening gold shine even brighter. The stanza conveys a sense of humility and respect for the celebrated poets, while also expressing the belief that even their humble verses can contribute to the overall brilliance of the poetic tradition.

In conclusion, Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue" is a significant piece of early American literature that provides a window into the challenges and aspirations of women writers in the 17th century. Through her self-deprecating tone and defiant spirit, Bradstreet addresses issues of gender, creativity, and societal expectations while asserting her right to participate in the literary world. Her willingness to confront these challenges has made her an important figure in the history of American literature and a symbol of early feminist literary voices.

