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Puritan Faith Deciphered through Poetry and a Narrative

The literary world lacks accurate knowledge about the lives of colonial Puritan women aside from what they themselves have published. Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson were authors from the earliest days of Puritan society in the newly founded colonies of America; both of which were married to prominent men, mothers, and had a profound credence in the Puritan religion and culture. The similarities between these two women are almost exact; they both wrote incredible pieces of literature that guided how people viewed not only Puritans, but women as well during this time period. The lens that these women crafted, however, were almost entirely different though despite having a myriad of shared qualities. Mary Rowlandson was taken captive by Native Americans after they burnt down her town Lancaster, as retaliation from King Phillips War; her story explains the difficulty she had attempting to keep her composure and faith. Anne Bradstreet wrote heartfelt poems that at the center of it all, displays her deep-rooted love and sometimes impiety for God. Both women were one and the same on paper, but in some cases, they were complete opposites; during their time as Puritan colonists, they carried the strife of learning how to protect their Puritan faith through circumstances readers see in the various themes of their writing.

Anne Bradstreet has no fear in renouncing any worldly possession for the love of God. She wrote a poem titled "*The Flesh and The Spirit*" about two sisters arguing over the difference between materialistic gifts that Earth may grant you and the salvation that God has promised

everyone, “Thy sinful pleasures I do hate, Thy riches are to me no bait, Thine honors do, nor will I love; For my ambition lies above (Bradstreet lines 57-60).” This excerpt shows the reader that Bradstreet had no affliction pertaining to giving up any desires she had on Earth for living in God’s kingdom. She went so far as to say that nothing on Earth was comparable of what was waiting for her after death. “The city where I hope to dwell, There’s none on earth that parallel (Bradstreet lines 85-86).” This is an interchangeable subject in Mary Rowlandson’s writing as well, she talks about how she was witness to the murder of her brother-in-law and her sister, was separated from her two children, and seen a bullet go through her youngest daughters hands (Rowlandson 262-263). It would make sense how going through this much trauma would shake a person to their very core, but Mary Rowlandson does not stir “yet the Lord by His almighty power preserved a number of us from death (Rowlandson 263)”. In the most brutal of moments where she has seen scores of dead bodies littering her town, was taken away from her children, and had to carry her dying child on her hip; she was still feverently proclaiming that God would save her and that he sheltered her from harm. This corresponds with Anne Bradstreet’s poetry because their writings both reflect an undeniable belief in God; they believe that despite any of the heartache they might have to bear, he would redeem their suffering if they truly lived through his message in the Scriptures. Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson acknowledge that they feel God processing and deliberating on their behavior in some fashion, and perhaps they feel this way because they were regarded as women of a higher status in Puritan society. The themes of their writing also reflect a predilection for this idea of a wonderful paradise in which they are validated for their anguish.

Despite their similarities in writing and lives, Mary Rowlandson and Anne Bradstreet had different motivations to tell their stories. Anne Bradstreet wrote in “*The Author to Her book*” that

she understood that there was no place for her in society to be both a woman as well as an author and explains that aside from being a mother and wife, she could contribute something even if her female mind pales in comparison to a males (Bradstreet 230). It does not sound like Anne Bradstreet truly meant what she wrote; almost as if she was saying that in order to get around the criticism that would follow for a woman of the time doing what was not their place. Anne Bradstreet was essentially giving into what they believed because she had to; women have curated this tactic throughout history in order to avoid complications. For example, in the Victorian era women were largely the main shoplifters as the number of department stores became widespread; they flipped the script by giving excuses that aided sexist stereotypes at the time in which women were forgetful and dull (Le, Mina). Mary Rowlandson, however, did not view the narration of her events as a pre first wave feministic diary. She wrote her story as a means to tell the world what she lived through, but what sets her writing apart from Anne Bradstreet's is her discomfort with women in charge. During Rowlandson's captivity, she was with her "master" and his wife Weetamoo; they stayed with her and fed her meals despite them being her captors. Weetamoo and Rowlandson often butted heads with each other because Weetamoo was not seen as just a mother or wife in her tribe, but as a leader. Rowlandson described her as saying "A severe and proud dame she was...When she had dressed herself, her work was to make girdles of wampum and beads (Rowlandson 283)". Rowlandson did not view Weetamoo as someone who was able to take charge or even be able to give orders that had weight to them, but rather a person who was proud to be who she was and intimidating. All of these were things that Mary Rowlandson could not even view herself in; she was not as liberal with her descriptions as Bradstreet was and she did not recognize that women were powerful without men being apart of the equation, hence how her writing differed from Bradstreet's.

The themes of Rowlandson and Bradstreet's writing is both the same and opposite at the same time. Anne Bradstreet wrote about her family, and the ways that they made her life complete. She was open and honest regarding the truth about motherhood and marriage; the lines of her poetry were calculated like they were meant to last a long time and truly inspire people for generations to come. Mary Rowlandson wrote about the heartache that encroached upon her life when she least expected it and how God's love made it all worthy in the end. There is something to be noted about their experiences; Mary wrote all of her accounts after her coming home and needing to set the record straight for her community. The reader must also be equipped with the knowledge that her husband was a minister in Lancaster, and she was of high prestige within the Puritan society. People looked up to her about how they should properly feel about withering faith, so it almost feels like false emotions could be scattered throughout her writing. A newspaper article relating the gestures Christians make without even believing in God do; "Belief isn't an outward action. It's possible to perform countless outward ceremonies and actions without even believing in Jesus (*Herald Express* 35)". There shouldn't be speculation over whether or not Mary Rowlandson actually believed in God, but rather was it an act of responsibility on her part? Mary Rowlandson may have felt compelled to write her story on paper for people to read for her own understanding of her grief and trauma, but used her faith as a ways to complete a goal as well which is something that contradicts what her sentiment is in the narrative.

In conclusion, Mary Rowlandson and Anne Bradstreet were human beings just like everyone else. They wrote how Puritan life affected them and now there are millions of authors that use the guidelines of their works for their benefit. People speak up about the trials and tribulations of motherhood, the sacrifices that are made in daily life, and events that traumatized

them because of their effectual literature. They were not exactly the same, but they knew what they believed in and inspired generations of authors to open a discourse over the things that make people human.

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