

Sketches of women, from the dusk of the Roman Empire to the dawn of the Enlightenment

Week 3: further reading.. for **Wynflaed** see Emily Amt in the Week 2 reading list; on **widowhood** see *Medieval women: a social history of women in England 450-1500*, by Henrietta Leyser 1995, Phoenix. **Ana de la Calle's** will is found in *Afro-Latino voices: narratives from the early Modern Ibero-Atlantic world 1550-1812* by KJ McNight and L Garofalo 2009.

Session 4. A room of one's own: women writers (and artists) and their work

A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction – so wrote Virginia Woolf in 1929. Space and independent means underlie historical opportunities for women to express creativity in arts and sciences. In this session we'll look at the experiences of women who found those means, and at their work. Often, the opportunity took the form of the enclosed monastic institution or the privileged walls of a royal palace. But, as our session on textiles and that on wills shows, women have, by one means or another, always found ways to create lasting works.

Anne Bradstreet (1612-72): *In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth (c.1638)*

As an RLF Fellow I was once inundated with students writing essays on a long verse of praise by the 17th-century American poet Anne Bradstreet, of whom I knew nothing. That a female poet of the period should write in praise of Elizabeth Tudor is hardly surprising; as the two lines below suggest, the poem bears a strong sense of feminine solidarity:

*Now say, have women worth, or have they none?
Or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?*

which continues with this rather neat pay-off:

*Nay Masculines, you have thus tax'd us long,
But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong.
Let such as say our sex is void of reason
Know 'tis a slander now, but once was treason.*

Elizabeth's feminine virtues: goodness, clemency, wisdom, justice and learning, are proof against those learned men of law and philosophy, and ancient custom, that deny women's fitness to rule; and Anne enjoys, in passing, sly digs at both the Catholic Spanish monarchy, for whom Elizabeth was a heretic, and that of France, whose Salique Law prevented the accession of a female ruler...

*From all the Kings on earth she won the prize.
Nor say I more than truly is her due.
Millions will testify that this is true.
She hath wip'd off th' aspersion of her Sex,
That women wisdom lack to play the Rex.*

As for those martial virtues traditionally associated with virtuous princes, Elizabeth possessed them in abundance: quelling rebels in Ireland, coming to the aid of the king of France and, in facing up to the threat of Philip II of Spain's planned invasion, teaching him manners: 'She rack't, she sack'd, she sunk his Armadoe.'

With Elizabeth's passing in 1603 the Rose, 'once so lovely fair', may now have withered but Elizabeth's example as a Virago, an Amazon, a glorious sun, a Phoenix, was without parallel among rulers. There are puzzles, however. On the face of it, Anne might have made more of a more profound irony in Elizabeth's uniqueness as a female ruler: that she, a Virgin queen, was both mother to her nation and, in her own words, married to her kingdom. The Virgin mother being something of a literary and spiritual trope, the poet's apparent failure to, as it were, sink the putt, needs some explaining. But it turns out that the Virgin Mary is not the only elephant in this room; in learning more about Anne Bradstreet's life and career one is drawn to a surprising conclusion: that her poem in praise of Elizabeth I actually carries a much more intriguing and subversive coded message.

Anne Dudley was born in 1612 in Northamptonshire. Her father, Thomas Dudley, who had fought at the Siege of Amiens in 1597 under Queen Elizabeth's banner, was a steward in the service of the puritan Earl of Lincoln. Her mother was Dorothy Yorke. Anne was married at the age of 16 to one of her father's younger associates, Simon Bradstreet. In the same year, 1628 she survived an outbreak of smallpox, while her father and new husband became involved with the Massachusetts Bay Company whose formation was propelled in part by the lure of opportunity and in part by antipathy towards the Catholic sympathies of the new king, Charles I (1625-49). In 1630 they sailed on board *Arbella*, the flagship of the famous Winthrop fleet. A year later they established a capital for the colony at what is now Cambridge, just three miles or so up the Charles River from Boston's isthmus. Anne's social and cultural environment was highly politicised, but also intellectual. Both Dudley and Anne's husband, Simon Bradstreet, were closely involved with the founding of Harvard in 1636. Two of the Bradstreet's sons – she bore eight children, all but one of whom survived infancy – were graduates. She must have known Anne Hutchinson, the charismatic Massachusetts midwife and spiritual firebrand for whom England had become too dangerous and who was to be excommunicated and banished from the colony in 1637.

Anne Bradstreet accumulated a substantial library and seems to have written poetry as a quite natural expression of her social, domestic, religious and philosophical life, immersed in the governance of the colony and in the politics and theology of non-conformism. There are poems expressing love for her children and her husband; on the seasons and on the ages of man. She wrote, too, of the heartbreak of losing the family home to fire in, of all years, 1666. Her audience was primarily familial, but there is a strong sense of the artist wanting to communicate more publically: she turned her creative thoughts to monarchy and the relations between Old and New England, in which the colony – Old England's daughter – laments their estrangement, while the mother country shares its own pains, of civil war...

*Art ignorant indeed of these my woes,
Or must my forced tongue these griefs disclose,
And must my self dissect my tatter'd state,
Which Amazed Christendom stands wondering at?
And thou a child, a Limb, and dost not feel
My weak'ned fainting body now to reel?*

In 1647, at the height of the English civil war, with King Charles lately imprisoned, Anne's brother-in-law, the Rev. John Woodbridge, sailed to England and, apparently without Anne's knowledge, presented a collection of her poems entitled *The tenth muse, lately sprung up in America, 'by a gentlewoman in those parts'* for publication. It was printed in London in 1650.

In Anne's milieu, full of tensions between her old home and new life, a world of spiritual and political convulsions and the incompatibilities of radicalism and conservatism, we can find a solution to some of the mysteries of her praise for Elizabeth. In her poetic failure to explore and exploit Elizabeth's paradoxical relationship with symbolic marriage and actual – or supposed – chastity can, perhaps, be read an aversion to drawing on the Catholic trope of the biblical mother of Christ and the theological and liturgical trappings of the old faith.

As for the coded message of the poem – which must have been composed before 1647 and which might, realistically, have been written after about 1630, I believe that in showering praise on her high and mighty majesty, with Elizabeth's protestant virtues and the combination of female wisdom, justice and clemency and martial, even virile defence of her country's interests, Anne's queen is in conspicuous possession of all that King Charles I, presiding over civil and religious war, betraying his people and rejecting the protestant reformation, was not. He is the unspoken subject (or object) of the poem – rather ironic, when one thinks that at about the same time, in faraway Ndongo, Queen Nzinga (Session 5) was symbolically passing herself as a man and fighting at the front of her armies against the Portuguese. If, by the time of its publication, Charles had not lost his head, then Anne Bradstreet's verse might well have been read as sedition in the Old country. As it was, in 1650 she found herself in perfect harmony with the new Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell.