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Katherine Appel April 7, 2022

“O Pregnant Brain”: Procreation and Power in Anne Bradstreet’s Poetry

by

Katherine Appel

Dr. Benjamin Reiss
Adviser

Department of English

Dr. Benjamin Reiss

Adviser

Dr. Catherine Nickerson

Committee Member

Dr. Ellen Idler

Committee Member

2022

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Katherine Appel

Dr. Benjamin Reiss

Adviser

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Abstract

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This thesis enters a vibrant conversation in feminist criticism regarding Anne Bradstreet's dual position as a mother and author. This project specifically examines Bradstreet's literal and figurative references to childbirth throughout her corpus, tracking how her thinking evolved as she transitioned from childless bride to bountiful grandmother. By employing a developmental approach to her works, this thesis explores shifts in her understanding and employment of birth, revealing her dynamic portrayal of maternity and birth. Chapter One begins by providing a detailed account of childbirth in colonial America, highlighting gendered differences in power and control of birth. The following two chapters analyze Bradstreet's early and late work respectively. Chapter Two reveals her initial depiction of mothers as passive and suffering. Additionally, this section illustrates her gradual transition to representing women as active in literary and physical creation. Chapter Three studies her late work, demonstrating how her intimate, rather than public, audience permitted her the space to offer a tender and proud reflection on her maternity experiences. Ultimately, by tracking birth across Bradstreet's corpus, one understands the deeply personal, fluctuating and complex meaning childbirth holds, allowing the modern reader to apply these lessons to America's current maternal health crisis.

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is about motherhood. And correspondingly, I must thank my first source for this project: my mom. I owe her the largest thank-you, much more than these few lines can accomplish. Her strength, love and courage informed each of my readings and serve as a constant testament to the power and importance of mothers. In every sense, I would not be where I am today without her.

This project also would not have been possible without the support of my adviser, Dr. Reiss. During my sophomore year, I approached him with a rough idea for a thesis of this nature. I knew I wanted to study my two passions, childbirth, and literature, but not much else. Rather than writing me off as a misguided underclassman, he dove in. With his constant encouragement and boundless knowledge, this thesis took shape, gradually growing into the final work I present here.

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Introduction

> **birth,** *n.* The fact of being born; the emergence of offspring from the body of its mother; the start of life as a physically separate being.

Aphrodite was born from the sea. Ironically, the goddess of love and fertility's origin began with castration. According to Greek myth, Uranus, ruler of the sky, detested his children and imprisoned them within the earth. To seek vengeance for her children, his wife created a sickle for her son Cronus to attack Uranus with. Cronus castrated his father and discarded the severed testicles into the Mediterranean Sea. Upon their entry the sea foamed and from that white surf, Aphrodite emerged (Mellby). In colonial rather than ancient times, Anne Bradstreet experienced her own delivery from the sea. On June 12th, 1630, the *Arbella* docked in Salem Harbor, successfully carrying a fleet of Puritans across the Atlantic (Hensley xlvi). Among these passengers, stood Anne Bradstreet, colonial America's first published poet. Reflecting on her emergence from the ocean and first glimpse of the rocky New England coast, Bradstreet muses that "I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose" (Bradstreet 263).

Her elation was not sustained. Like the tide, Bradstreet's heart continued to rise and fall until her death in 1672. For each moment of joy, Bradstreet also experienced turbulence and distress—or, in her words, no "perfect bliss without a mixture of woe" (Bradstreet 258). After arriving in New England and settling in Boston, she lamented her childlessness, praying to God for a baby. Eventually she delivered her first son in 1633 and subsequently entered a virtually constant reproductive cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and weaning. This cycle continued for the next twenty-years as she raised her eight children, leaving her body in continual fluctuations between unity and division, joy and pain.

Much scholarship surrounds Bradstreet, as her position as a mother and female poet in the American colonies allows literary and historical analyses into "details of early American life

absent from the writings of her male contemporaries" (Lutes 309). She provides a unique opportunity for feminist scholars to examine her response to and defiance of literary and social sexism. While many critics employ a gender lens to comment on her poetry, fewer examine how childbirth and motherhood informed her poetry, despite her twenty-years of simultaneous literary and physical procreation. Within this subcategory of feminist criticism, Jean Marie Lutes and Bethany Reid read Bradstreet alongside seventeenth-century discourse on childbirth. Lutes demonstrates that Bradstreet uses reproductive language to "reject or ignore the association of the female body with inherent physical weakness" (Lutes 337). Reid connects Bradstreet's poetic images of childbirth to exalted births in colonial America. Through tapping into a larger feminine discourse on childbirth and enacting the highly legitimate role mother, Bradstreet can claim her place in the male-dominated poetic tradition (Reid 540).

While different in their approaches, both Lutes and Reid rely on "The Author to Her Book" as their chief example of Bradstreet's use of reproductive discourse. In doing so, their analyses only focus on her relationship to maternity at the time of composing "The Author" and invite an opportunity for a wider investigation of her representation of childbirth across her career. Bradstreet's position as a writer and mother of eight children necessitates not only considering representations of birth in her work, but also tracking how her thinking evolved as she transitioned from childless bride to bountiful grandmother. Therefore, this project examines her literal and figurative references to birth throughout her work, revealing how her relationship to motherhood progresses over the course of her life.

By considering Bradstreet's entire corpus, this study grants equal weight to her early and late work, instead of partaking in perennial debates over which period deserves greater attention. Following Rich's lead, much feminist criticism focuses on Bradstreet's poems after "The Author

to Her Book." In her 1967 foreword to Bradstreet, Rich claims that "Anne Bradstreet's early work may be read or skimmed … Apart from its technical amateurishness, it is remarkably impersonal even by Puritan standards" (Rich xiv). Some scholars, such as Timothy Sweet, Alice Henton, and Tamara Harvey push back against this privileging of Bradstreet's late work, demonstrating how her early work follows gendered conventions to subvert the male literary tradition. Still, critical consensus remains that her poems following "The Author to Her Book" "are the most moving and the most skilled" (Martin & Hinrichs). To develop a holistic understanding of Bradstreet's representations of maternity, this project studies her entire corpus. This comprehensive examination of Bradstreet allows one to recognize and analyze shifts in her reproductive thinking, ultimately demonstrating her dynamic portrayal of motherhood.

Through this developmental approach, one can categorize Bradstreet's life into three distinct twenty-year periods, each containing unique trials and triumphs. She arrived in New England as a studious and intrepid young woman. Only eighteen years old, Bradstreet balanced her new marriage and new colonial life along with unfruitful attempts to conceive and the beginnings of her literary career. At twenty-one, she delivered her first child, her miracle son Samuel. His birth marks the commencement of Bradstreet's following two decades of physical and poetic reproduction. During this fecund period, she relates the physical and psychological tolls that both literary and actual maternity procreation bring. Twenty years later and after the birth of her final child in 1653, Bradstreet's cycle of reproduction ceases and her poetic representation of motherhood shifts. While her later works portray her difficulty in accepting her changing maternal role, they also showcase her unconditional love for her children and confidence in her childrearing abilities. No longer the young poet of twenty, Bradstreet had matured and flourished: she built a home, overcame severe illnesses, raised eight children, and

authored the first collection of colonial American poetry. Corresponding to her biographical progression and shifting poetic themes, this project splits Bradstreet's early and late work at 1653, after "The Author to Her Book." Chapter Two studies her presentation of childbirth in her early work and Chapter Three explores her shifting relationship to maternity in her late work. By tracing her representations of childbirth throughout her complete poetic body, one discovers an evolving portrait of motherhood, rich in nuance and complexity. Comparable to childrearing itself, her artistic rendering of maternity is constantly fluctuating and rewardingly messy.

While she offers a remarkable presentation of birth, this poetic representation does not exist in a vacuum. Bradstreet wrote within a multi-layered historical moment filled with hierarchies, conflicts and cruelty. On one level, she used her poetry to claim her authority within a patriarchal system that severely constricted female bodies and minds—a system that stressed female subordination and exiled women who dared to speak out. As a colonial woman, Bradstreet was tasked with abandoning her birthland, raising a family, maintaining a household and fulfilling colonial leaders' expectations. Alongside writing her poetry, she navigated the various roles demanded of her. While her brother-in-law notes that Bradstreet balanced composing with "discrete managing of her family occasions," her extraordinary body of poetry was far from what he deemed "the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments" (Woodbridge 2). As an artist, she wrote throughout her life, using her poetry to make sense of her varied experiences.

Although Bradstreet's poetry confronts gender hierarchies, her works do not comment on the violent dispossession of the Indigenous peoples surrounding her. Her voice of liberation only extends so far. As her poetic successor Adrienne Rich demonstrates, questions arise regarding the influence of Bradstreet's larger historical moment on her work and life. Rich asks "What has

been the woman poet's relationship to nature, in a land where both women and nature have, from the first, been raped and exploited?" (Rich xxi). Expanding Rich's questioning, what was the woman poet's relationship to Native peoples displaced and exploited by the expansion of the American colonies? Did Bradstreet connect her own subordination with the dispossession of the people surrounding her? Or did her whiteness and religion permit her to distance herself from the suffering of others? While more research is needed to answer these complex questions, when we study Bradstreet's literary and physical generation, we must be conscious of the impacts of these reproductions on her surroundings. During her lifetime, only one book of her poetry was published. This collection became widely popular in England, advertising the success of the Christian enterprise in Massachusetts (Gordon 244). Her literary creations were partially used as support to continue the conversion of Natives to Christianity. Viewed in another light, the same births she celebrates could have contributed to the brutal displacing of others.

Recognizing the wider context Bradstreet existed within, her poetry remains an important reclamation of one woman's birthing experience within a patriarchal system that attempted to usurp control of childbirth. While seventeenth-century women controlled the birthing chamber, this control dwindled outside its walls. In the public sphere, men dominated interpretations of childbirth. Before dissecting Bradstreet's birth representations, Chapter One examines colonial childbirth, noting the tension between female-led reproduction and its surrounding male-driven discourse. Through understanding attempts to remove power from birthing persons, one gains a deeper appreciation of both the significance of Bradstreet's poetry and its connections to contemporary American childbirth. By pushing her own perception of maternity into the literary birthing room, she asserts her ownership over her maternal experiences. She resists sexist notions of men as creators and women as reproducers, both in literary and actual procreation. She also

resists confinement to the seventeenth century. Given America's current maternal health crisis, a crucial need remains to listen to maternal voices. And by listening to one Puritan mother's poetic voice, we gain the tools needed to approach our present crisis. To study childbirth in Bradstreet's poetry requires an attentiveness to change, appreciation of subtleties, and embrace of complexity, all of which can inform our approach to remedy the modern birthing chamber.

Chapter One: Control and Interpretation of Puritan Childbirth

> "*I will that the Younger Women, Marry, bear Children.* When you find that a Conception has brought you unto *Child-bearing* circumstances, Let your Submission to the *Will* of God therein, be full of Satisfaction, and Resignation."
>
> -Cotton Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda*

Compared to the seventeenth-century domestic birthing room, the modern biomedical room contains many foreign objects: fetal heart rate monitors, epidural needles, forceps, vacuums, and men. In fact, men remained outside the birthing chamber until roughly a century after Anne Bradstreet's final delivery of her son, John in 1652. When Bradstreet delivered her eight children, she most likely did so at home, accompanied by a midwife and a small group of supporting women. Richard and Dorothy Wertz highlight how these women provided both physical assistance during birth itself and also crucial emotional support during the consequent "lying-in" period, as "birth continued to be a fundamental occasion for the expression of care and love among women" (Wertz 6). In this system of social childbirth, the female midwife assumed the chief position of power, possessing the practical knowledge and experience to help ensure a successful birth. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes that "momentarily, at least, childbirth reversed the position of the sexes, thrusting women into center stage and men into supporting roles" (Ulrich 131). Although men rarely physically interfered in colonial birth, due to their literacy and political authority, they remained in control of the medical discourse, religious interpretations, and social consequences surrounding childbirth.

Bradstreet's position as a curious reader, devout Puritan and engaged community member would have familiarized her with these intertwined framings of birth. Through encouragement from her father, Thomas Dudley, Bradstreet became an avid reader and likely encountered several medical treatises in Dudley's library. Additionally, as Jean Marie Lutes speculates,

Bradstreet's frequent childhood illnesses could have furthered her desire to read about and understand the human body, turning to medical treatises such as Dr. Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia or a Description of the Body of Man, Together with the Controversies Thereto Belonging* (Lutes 314). Helen McHanon demonstrates how Bradstreet draws upon language found in Crooke's text (McHanon 121-122). When originally published in 1615 by William Jaggard (also the publisher of Shakespeare's first folio), *Microcosmographia* served as the most detailed and updated anatomical treatise in the English language. While Crooke himself remained a controversial figure within the College of Physicians, his text was well-received, as indicated by its reissuing in 1616 and 1618 (O'Malley 6, 11). Rather than providing new knowledge, *Microcosmographia* summarized contemporary anatomical discourse and dominant medical paradigms, making it a useful source to understand the general scientific thinking on the female body that Bradstreet was versed in.

Crooke's text follows the classic principles of Galenic medicine, reasoning that balance of four humors regulated the body's physical state. The humors were strongly linked to temperature, with blood and yellow bile as the hottest humors and phlegm and black bile as the coldest. Maintaining one's health depended upon establishing an equilibrium between hot / cold humors. Both Galen and Crooke worked under the assumption that by nature, the female body was colder and weaker than the male body. After declaring men hotter than women, Crooke does apologize, reflecting that "I had need heere to Apologise for my selfe for speaking so much of woemens weaknes" (Crooke 276). Still, even in his apology, he holds the position that women's cold nature results in an inherent feminine weakness. From this coldness, Aristotle proposed that women do not contribute to the procreation of the child, reasoning that men's heat alone results in conception (Connell 405). Here, Crooke diverges from this ancient logic, claiming that

"women do yeeld seede which hath in it some operatiue or active faculty" and "the confluence of the seedes of both sexes is of absolute necessity in generation" (Crooke 285-286).

Despite Crooke's relatively egalitarian view of women's role in conception, he does not extend this equality into his discussions of the womb and birth itself. Lutes notes that Crooke "blames the womb for the failure of almost every internal organ in a woman's body" (Lutes 317). Not only does he believe the womb causes physical disease, but Crooke also asserts its link to emotional distress and mental disease (Lutes 317-318). He posits that "… euill humors doe fall together with the blood vnto the wombe which is a common sinke as it were of the body, by the permixtion of which humours the blood acquireth a malignant quality" (Crooke 290). In addition to condemning the female body, Crooke also erases women's activity during childbirth. In a section of *Microcosmographia* entitled "The exclusion or birth of thr Childe," Crooke's description of birth portrays the infant, not the mother, as entirely in control of initiating labor. He narrates birth as a contest between the infant and the womb, commenced by the mother's inability to further nourish the infant:

> Now when as the mother is not able to supply vnto the Infant either the ayre whereby it liueth in sufficient quantity through the narrow vmbilical arteries, or other nourishment by the vmbilicall veines, whereby it might be supported and refrigerated, the Infant then as it were vndertaking of himselfe a beginning of motion, striueth to free him|selfe from the prison and dungeon wherein he was restrayned; kicking therefore hee brea|keth the membranes wherein he was inwrapped, and arming himselfe with strong violence maketh way for his inlargement with all the strength and contention that he may (Crooke 269-270).

In this combative description, the mother remains removed from the battlefield existing within her own body. Crooke only reports that the mother in labor may voluntarily draw in her breath to

assist the strife between the infant and the womb. Of the women present at a birth, Crooke praises the midwife over the mother, stating that "the skilfull hand of the heads-woman or Midwife as we cal them … setteth the woman in a due posture or position of parts … and finally draweth away as easily as is possible the after-birth which stayeth behinde" (Crooke 269). Out of all the figures present in the birthing room, including mother, midwife, infant and womb, the mother holds the least amount of control and authority during her own birthing experience.

Early modern women had plenty to fear about birth, and the use of violent imagery in Crooke's text and other dominant representations of childbirth could only amplify that fear. Rather than portraying birth as a natural and celebratory event, seventeenth-century medicine viewed birth as an epic struggle between the infant and womb, prompting expecting women to prepare for deaths in battle. Some scholars, such as Wertz and Wertz, propose that actual maternal mortality rates remained relatively low in the colonies, resulting in women dreading "birth more because of this cultural emphasis on birth as potential death than because of high rates of mortality" (Wertz 21). However, although maternal mortality rates were potentially lower than a previous generation of historians thought, death in childbirth was much higher than our contemporary standards. In 2020, the overall American maternal mortality rate was around 0.00238%, meaning that for every 100,000 live births there were 23.8 deaths (Hoyert 1). While it is difficult to generate a comparable maternal mortality rate in the colonies, the diary of Martha Ballard, a respected American midwife practicing in the late eighteenth-century, offers a glimpse into the successfulness of childbirth in early America. Of Ballard's recorded deliveries, she witnessed 5 maternal deaths per 1000 live births, making her maternal mortality rate around 0.5%, almost 300 times higher than today's rate (Ulrich 171). As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich highlights in her study of Ballard's diary, Ballard was a talented and experienced midwife. Her

maternal mortality rate was most likely lower than colonial averages, making a rate of 0.5% a conservative estimate. Additionally, women entered labor more often, as some historians estimate that the average, married woman in Massachusetts delivered 6.1 children (Waters 66). This larger family size resulted in more instances to fear death in childbirth, even after a successful first pregnancy. Considering these figures, women's fear of childbirth probably stemmed from a combination of the comparatively large amounts of deaths in labor and the foreboding cultural representations of childbirth.

As if these worrying medical accounts of childbirth were not enough to frighten prospective mothers, religious depictions of childbirth also increased anxiety regarding birth. And like the medical accounts, they figured childbearing women as passive vessel by transferring the power to interpret the meaning of birth from women to religious officials. Like most aspects of life in the colonies, medicine became intertwined with religion. The first physicians in America were often religious leaders within the community. Claiming an authority derived from God, they usurped the power to interpret women's birthing experiences. Moreover, Ulrich highlights instances in which "learned men" transitioned from interpreting to actually intervening in childbirth, summarizing that "in a moment of extreme peril the traditional experience of the midwife gave way to the book-learning and professional aura of the minister-physician" (Ulrich 133).

As a learned man and Boston minister, Cotton Mather provides a striking example of a religious interpretation of the female birthing experience in his medical treatise, *The Angel of Bethesda*. While Mather did not practice medicine, he gained an understanding of contemporary and classical medical principles through his studies. Combining his spiritual and medical interests, he compiled his medical knowledge into *The Angel*, which he finished in 1724 (Jones

xvi-xvii). This source reflects a powerful Puritan man's thinking about medical events, including early obstetrics. In a section dismally entitled "Retired Elizabeth. A Long, tho' Very Hard Chapter for a Woman Whose Travail Approaches With Remedies to Abate the Sorrows of Childbearing," Mather instructs pious New England women on how to best prepare for labor. As its title implies, the chapter portrays pregnancy, birth, and lying-in as torturous periods of pain. He opens by proclaiming that during labor a mother's "*Loins* will be *filled with Pain, Pangs will take hold on her, the Pangs of a Woman which travileth*" (Mather 235). As in Crooke's description, Mather portrays birth as a fearsome and painful event for women, without experiencing labor himself.

Rather than just listing remedies for women's pains, Mather extends his account to document the spiritual reward women can receive through childbirth. Despite the pain, Mather instructs women to be grateful for childbirth, viewing birth as a unique opportunity for women to exercise their piety. During pregnancy, he prescribes constant prayer for women, writing that "Certainly your *Pregnant Time* should be a praying time. If you have never yett *Prayed Earnestly,* tis now a Time to do it: and Lament it poenitently before the Lord (Mather 241). Only though prayer can women expect to escape from dreadful barrenness and complete a successful delivery. Reflecting the popular fear of death in childbirth, Mather also sees pregnancy as a time for women to contemplate their potential death. As Puritans highly regarded preparation for death, Mather claims that women's ability to prepare for death in childbirth makes women more pious than men. He writes that:

> … there is pretty near an Equal Number of *Males* and *Female* that are Born into the World, the Number of the *Males* who are apparently *Pious,* is not so great as that of the *Females*. Be sure … if the View of an *Approaching Travail,* do not make the poor

> Women Serious, and Cause them seriously to Consider their Condition and bring them into a Considerate, Sollicitous, Effectual Preparation for Eternity (Mather 236).

While Mather still considers women "poor" and unserious, he concedes that through childbirth women gain a devotion that men cannot equally achieve. This concession highlights the spiritual importance placed on women to procreate. Further compelling women to reproduce, Mather argues that women only liberate themselves from Eve's original sin through childbirth. In expecting mothers' moments of prayer and contemplation, he proposes that "… the *Curse* is turned into a *Blessing*. The Approach of their *Travails*, putts them upon those Exercises of PIETY, which render them truly *Blessed* ones" (Mather 236). Although he celebrates pregnancy as a unique time in a woman's life that brings her closer to God, his account also pressures women to procreate, as failing to do so would result in a failure to transition from cursed to blessed.

Mather also permits no space for women's own interpretations of their childbirth experiences. He explicitly silences mothers who dare to complain of their pain in childbirth, the same pain he describes as "anguish" and a time of "sudden destruction" (Mather 235-236). Instead of allowing women to acknowledge their pain, Mather mocks women who articulate their difficulties, exclaiming "How *Unnatural* will it look in you, to Complain of a State, whereinto the *Laws of Nature* Established by God, have brought you!" (Mather 236). Although he talks of the sorrows of childbirth, the text's later section on remedies for complications in childbirth diminishes women who believe labor cannot be easy. Due to the existence of natural remedies, Mather devalues the "poor Women" who think "there is as little Sense in speaking of, *An Easy Travail*, as the Frenchmen think there is, inn speaking of, *An Easy Prison*" (Mather 245). While he praises natural remedies, he further contradicts himself by refusing midwifes, the practical

experts in holistic cures for childbirth complications. He warns that "*Deliverances* come as Effects of His *Commands* unto His *Ministers*. No *Midwives* can do, what the *Angels* can!" (Mather 244). By denigrating one of the most well-respected female roles in colonial New England and censoring how women should speak of childbirth, Mather illustrates the power men held to control the discourse on childbirth.

Viewed in light of wider trends in colonial use of birth language, Mather's text exemplifies the common use of the female body and its ability to procreate to metaphorize the divine. Contemporary certified nurse midwife and scholar, Samantha Cohen Tamulis calls attention to this tendency, stating that "the female body and its capacity for pregnancy, childbirth and lactation are central to Puritan efforts to connect the divine with the earthly" (Cohen Tamulis 366). Cohen Tamulis understands this trend as an early form of what she calls "obstetric thinking." By obstetric thinking, she refers to "an attitude and a rhetorical strategy that describes childbirth in terms of pathology, objectifies the mother's body, and calls into question the ability of women to manage their births without men" (Cohen Tamulis 366). Before men introduced forceps and usurped control of the birthing chamber, men used religious rhetoric as a tool for obstetric thinking. Not only does most of Mather "Retired Elizabeth" objectify women as vehicles for reproduction, but the text also speaks of the godly in terms of the female body, forming a god-as-mother metaphor. Connecting the maternal ability to wean children to the Puritan desire to relinquish earthly attachments, Mather instructs his followers to pray to the holy spirit to "*Wean me [from] this World*" (Mather 239). His text also illustrates common Puritan thinking of entering heaven as a "new birth" and "deliverance" unto God. In employing these obstetric phrases, Mather reduces the complex reproductive experience to a convenient metaphor that serves his own purposes.

Although *Angel of Bethesda* postdates Bradstreet's lifetime, her church attendance and studies of Puritan scripture certainly would have familiarized her with the god-as-mother metaphor. As a continued member of the preeminent minister John Cotton's congregation, Bradstreet served witness to his sermons containing feminized language to narrate Puritans' relationship with God. For example, in a series of sermons entitled "Christ the Fountain of Life," Cotton compares devout followers to the offspring of God's word, offering that "… if we speak of our spiritual birth, then *we brethren are children of the Promise*" (Cotton 95). In addition to using maternal language to describe the divine, Cotton parallels his own teachings to the female body, titling his catechism for children: *Milk for Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of both Testaments.* Here, Cotton seizes the mother's role as nourisher, imagining his book as "chiefly, for spiritual nourishment of Boston babes in either England: But may be of like used for any Children" (Cotton 1). By equating his work to breastfeeding, Cotton interchanges his spiritual "nourishment" for a mother's natural breastmilk, thus minimizing the latter's unique importance and appropriating this life-giving ability to himself.

In addition to lacking interpretive control over the conversation on childbirth, Puritan women faced demanding societal pressures to procreate and to follow specific expectations while doing so. One such expectation was for expecting mothers to avoid straining emotions and intense thoughts during their pregnancy, as they may harm the baby. This idea of maternal impression dates back to medieval times. Katharine Park examines historic medical texts and folklore that demonstrate a "universally acknowledged ability of women to mark or even deform the fetuses they carried through the faculty of vision, mediated by imagination" (Park 262). If a pregnant woman viewed an object that spurred strong emotions, the images could imprint on the malleable fetus. Crooke and Mather both express this belief in their respective fields, indicating

the belief's popularity in the seventeenth century. Crooke refers to the ability of the mother's imagination to shape the baby if her imagination overcomes the natural "formative faculties" of reproduction. As Lindal Buchanan notes, "the natural order of generation called for the father's image to be replicated in his offspring" (Buchanan 241). Crooke notes that "oftentimes the Imagination of that thing is imprinted in the tender Infant which the mother with childe doth ardently desire, which is onely to bee imputed to the strength of the fancy" (Crooke 311). Mather also cautions women that "the *Passions* or the *Surfeits* of the Mother make a Strange Impression on the Infant; yea, on the very *Soul* of the Infant. Be *Temperate in all things*" (Mather 241).

While authorities urged expecting mother to remain "temperate" to avoid imprinting upon the baby, women often continued their normal household duties throughout their pregnancy. In *Good Wives*, Ulrich illustrates the difficulties of balancing daily life with folk beliefs surrounding pregnancy through the case of Margaret Prince of Gloucester. When Prince delivered a stillborn child, she formally accused William Browne of troubling her during her pregnancy. However, her neighbors, the Kettles, argued in Browne's defense, claiming that they saw Prince carrying a bucket of clay atop her head. According to Ulrich, the Kettles believed that Prince's actions resulted in the miscarriage due to the folk belief that "reaching over one's head in the last months of pregnancy would result in a tangled umbilical cord and the possible death of the child" (Ulrich 137). Prince responded that she had to carry the buckets to finish her daily chores and that her husband would not assist her. Prince's case illustrates the difficulty expecting women faced in managing traditional beliefs and domestic obligations. Furthermore, Prince reveals Puritan society's low regard for a woman's emotions following a miscarriage, as she was immediately blamed for her child's death.

Considering the difficulty of navigating societal expectations as a pregnant woman and new mother, women relied on other women for practical advice and emotional support during birth itself and the postpartum period. When a woman entered labor, the husband often called the midwife and assembled a group of female neighbors and family members. Reflecting the importance of these female assistants, the mother often provided wittily named "groaning cakes" and "groaning beer" for the women to consume before the birth. The women then led the delivery, offering food for strength and wine to relax (Wertz 15). In more difficult births, the midwife provided a variety of herbal remedies for pain and performed physical adjustments to assist with the delivery. One such practice was for midwifes to lubricate their hands and/or the birth canal with butter and other fats to help with stretching (Ulrich 128). This practical advice could ease a woman's worries about childbirth. Additionally, as Wertz and Wertz emphasize, "the potential medical value of the psychological support these female friends offered should not be undervalued; the presence of women provided particular reassurance during a women's first birth, helping her to relax and thus ease her pain" (Wertz 5).

The assistants commonly stayed through the beginning stages of the lying-in period, continuing to provide emotional support for the new mother and instructions on breastfeeding. The lying-in period typically lasted three or four weeks. During this period, supporting women took over the mother's household chores, allowing the mother and infant time to rest and bond (Wertz 3-4). Contrastingly, in contemporary America's efficiency-driven lifestyle, women remain on average only two to three days in the hospital following birth (Fahey 613). This short period of dedicated support leaves little space for women to successfully transition into the demands of motherhood, suggesting the irreplaceable benefits of the colonial system of social childbirth and lying-in.

Lying-in also served as a time for the mother to begin breastfeeding her infant. As Cohen Tamulis notes, Puritans viewed breastfeeding as an integral aspect of maternal responsibilities (Cohen Tamulis 371). However, mothers did not begin breast feeding immediately following delivery, as the colostrum, the initial milk produced by lactating mothers, was considered impure (Treckel 27). As a result of this belief, another lactating woman often accompanied the coterie of female assistants present after the birth. This woman served as a wet-nurse until the mother's milk was deemed usable (Ulrich 129). As they did with most aspects of childbirth, male authorities also formed opinions on the use of a wet-nurse, criticizing women who permanently employed a nurse. Paula A. Treckel claims that Puritan ministers used a scriptural rather than medical basis to "castigate those women who chose not to nurse their own infants as vain, Eve-like and sinful in nature" (Treckel 32). Still, even with external male regulation, birth and the weeks that followed remained an essential feminine interval for mothers to deliver and care for their infants with the support of fellow women.

While colonial women offered their assistance to married and unmarried women alike, childbirth became a time of interrogation for the latter. In cases of illegitimate pregnancies, the midwife was tasked with obtaining the identity of the newborn's father. Due to the laboring woman's vulnerable position, colonists believed that labor increased the woman's likelihood of truthfully confessing the father's name (Fitzpatrick 745). Following the delivery, the midwife testified the mother's confession to the court. As the court highly respected perinatal confessions, this practice permitted women some control over identifying a child's father and allowed them to acquire the father's financial support. Still, as Ellen Fitzpatrick emphasizes, questioning a woman during labor, in the presence of many other women, most likely left the new mother emotionally isolated (Fitzpatrick 747). Fitzpatrick unearths the testimony of colonial midwife

Johannah Corlis, demonstrating the accusing questions that unmarried mother Elizabeth Emerson endured during her pregnancy. Much as in modern times, after Emerson revealed she was raped by her neighbor, Emerson was asked if she yelled or resisted, if she had slept with him before, and whether she consented. Corlis asked Emerson, "Why did you not Scratch him, or kick him" (Fitzpatrick 748). Emerson's case illustrates how even within the feminine birthing room, legal proceedings could further complicate her pregnancy by removing her autonomy over her birth and transforming social support into social isolation.

Despite midwives' relative power in the colonies, they too became subjected to the court's will when deliveries went wrong, as the following case of Jane Hawkins signifies. After immigrating to America from Cornwall, Hawkins served as a midwife in the Massachusetts Bay Colony alongside Anne Hutchinson. On October 17th, 1637, Hawkins and female assistants were summoned to the bedside of Mary Dyer, who entered labor two weeks early. After a difficult labor, which necessitated calling Hutchinson for support, Dyer delivered a stillborn and severely deformed daughter. Following the advice of Reverend John Cotton, the Dyers buried the baby (Beal 28). However, only six months after the baby's burial, future governor John Winthrop exhumed the body as part of Anne Hutchinson's trial, believing that the body could provide evidence for Hutchinson's heresy (Schutte 89). Further emphasizing the church's influence over childbirth, as Hutchinson stood trial for religious dissention, her midwifery skills were called into question. Of note, Simon Bradstreet and Thomas Dudley traveled from Ipswich to Boston to serve as magistrates at the trial, making Anne Bradstreet aware of Dyer's miscarriage (Reid 517). In his journal, Winthrop describes the Dyers' infant as a monster, writing that:

> It was a woman child, stillborn, about two months before the just time, having life a few hours before; it came hiplings [with the hips leading] till she turned it; it was of ordinary

> bigness; it had a face, but no head, and the ears stood upon the shoulders and were like an ape's; it had no forehead, but over the eyes four horns, hard and sharp; two of them were above one inch long, the other two shorter; the eyes standing out, and the mouth also; the nose hooked upward; all over the breast and back full of sharp pricks and scales, like a thornback; … behind, between the shoulders, it had two mouths, and in each of them a piece of red flesh sticking out; it had arms and legs as other children; but, instead of toes, it had on each foot three claws, like a young fowl, with sharp talons (Winthrop 267).

As Anne Jacobson Schutte exhibits, Winthrop himself offers no interpretation of the religious significance of the deformed infant, but Thomas Weld, who edited and printed Winthrop's account, speculates on the meaning of the baby's appearance:

> Then God himselfe was pleased to step in with his casting voice, and bring in his owne vote and suffrage from heaven, by testifying his displeasure against their opinions and practices … And see how the wisdom of God fitted this judgment to her [Hutchinson's] sinne every way, for looke as she had vented mishapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monster (Schutte 97).

Here, Weld references both Dyer's infant and Hutchinson's own deformed infant, which she birthed after emigrating to Rhode Island. To Weld, the two babies served as physical signals of God's disapproval of Hutchinson's religious teachings (Schutte 98). Apart from serving as an example of male control over interpretations of women's traumatic birthing experiences, the fate of Jane Hawkins shows the fragility of women's power in colonial New England. Following the discovery of the malformed infant, the colony forbade Hawkins from practicing midwifery and ordered her not to return to Boston. She exiled to Rhode Island with Hutchinson and the Dyers

(Beal 29). Despite her prestigious position as a midwife, Hawkins remained like any other colonial woman, bound to the wills and resolutions of men in power.

Examining the historical circumstances and conversations regarding birth in colonial America makes apparent the need for women to forge their own spaces to both complete and interpret birth. Excluded from the birthing chamber's inner happenings, men stretched their limited understanding of childbirth to satisfy their own professional, religious, or political needs. In doing so, they dominated the conversation surrounding childbirth and excluded the voices of society that knew childbirth most intimately. Therefore, colonial women's sparse accounts of childbirth become particularly important sources of information to discern women's attitudes towards birthing. By speaking of pregnancy, birth and childrearing, women reclaim the power to make meaning of their own narratives within a male-dominated discourse. In the following chapters, this project explores how Bradstreet accomplishes this task through her poetic interpretations of birth.

Chapter Two: Born in Sorrow

> "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly increase thy sorrows and thy conceptions. In sorrow thou shall bring forth children, and thy desire *shall be subject* to thine husband, and he shall rule over thee"
>
> -Genesis 3:16, *The Geneva Bible*

A year before Bradstreet entered "travail" to deliver her first son Samuel, she was struck with pains different from those of childbirth. In January 1632, her second winter in the colonies, Bradstreet became severely ill, debilitated by fever (Gordon 126). Reflecting on her malady years later, she describes a "lingering sickness like a consumption together with a lameness, which correction I saw the Lord sent to humble and try me and do me good …" (Bradstreet 264). This journal entry outlines Bradstreet's frequent refrain that through pain, wisdom and joy transpire. Despite her lifelong questioning of this mantra, she ultimately claims that "if we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome" (Bradstreet 299). In the months immediately following her illness, Bradstreet gained her own prosperity, composing her first known poem and delivering her first child.

While some scholars dismiss Bradstreet's early work as impersonal mimicry of literary conventions, she nestles her perception of childbirth into her early poetic reproductions. As this chapter progresses, we watch young Bradstreet's depiction of maternity evolve. Her earliest work displays an understanding of herself as a passive participant both in her poetic and physical reproductions. However, in a dramatic struggle for control over her poetry collection, Bradstreet erupts to declare her assertive agency. Responding to her male publisher's formal attempts to claim literary paternity of her collection, she composes "The Author to Her Book." This selection fuses her roles of author and mother to defend maternal ownership of her poems. In

response to restrictive stigmas surrounding female poets, Bradstreet uses motherhood as a legitimizing force. As Lutes indicates, by fulfilling her prescribed maternal duties, Bradstreet validates her ability to enter into the traditionally masculine position of poet (Lutes 337). She is not seen as a dissenting and dangerous woman, but rather a proper Puritan mother with a scholarly inclination. Skillfully navigating her historical moment, she weaves a dynamic representation of childbirth into the male literary canon.

Her historical context appears throughout her early work, as Bradstreet represents childbirth in combination with her particular colonial situation. Separated from her own birth land, she interprets the significance of childrearing in an unfamiliar land. As a colonial woman, she is expected to propagate a new generation of Puritans. And as a colonial poet, she is expected to forge a new poetic tradition, but remain compliant with English literary conventions. Her misleadingly titled poetry collection, *The Tenth Muse Sprung Up Lately in America*, and its ensuing popularity in England, displays this pressure for procreation in the colonies. As Ivy Schweitzer jests, Bradstreet "did not spring full-blown from the rocky strand of the New World, as the title … suggests" (Schweitzer 292). Rather, she maintained an inherent connection to English culture, despite her physical disconnection. To mirror this geopolitical dynamic, Bradstreet uses maternity itself to contemplate her political moment and position as a colonial writer. Despite humble declarations otherwise, her ability to refashion her maternal experiences to inform her work asserts fierce poetic skill.

Poetry as Posterity

Even in her earliest work and at only "twice ten years old," she references her unique ability as a female writer to create both biologically and poetically (Bradstreet 241). Her first

known poem, written in the wake of her illness and appropriately entitled "Upon a Fit of Sickness" (1632), considers her eventual death. She compares human life to a bubble "no sooner blown, but dead and gone, / ev'n as a word that's speaking" (Bradstreet 241). By shifting from past to present tense, Bradstreet separates life from language, proposing that one's words continue to speak posthumously. Language becomes posterity to memorialize its late orator or author. Her invocation of the poetry as posterity metaphor is not original. Throughout the literary canon, male writers imagine their work as children, connecting literary works to biological reproduction. In *Astrophel and Stella*, Philip Sidney employs the metaphor, projecting himself as pregnant with ideas. As he awaits their birth, he uses reproductive language to describe that: "My mouth doth water, and my breast doth swell / My tongue doth itch, my thoughts in labor be" (Sidney 1-2). Writing to his beloved, Shakespeare draws upon the poetry-posterity connection in Sonnet XVII, positing that "But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme" (Shakespeare 13-14). Ross Knecht argues that Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate that "poetic production and biological reproduction are thoroughly interwoven and mutually dependent" (Knecht 280). Biological reproduction allows poetry to live through future generations of readers, while poetry conditions cultural attitudes towards reproduction. Recognizing biology and procreation as interrelated, Shakespeare and Sidney's use of the childbirth metaphor remain distinct from Bradstreet's due to sex-based differences in the authors' reproductive capabilities. When Bradstreet employs the metaphor, her position as a female poet and mother allows her comparisons to assume a double meaning and greater relevancy as she uses her own biological experiences to inform her poetry. Her literal pregnancies and deliveries connect her poetry to a female history of reproduction not present in the writings of her male counterparts.

Studying sex differences in the metaphor's use, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that "women's use of the childbirth metaphor demonstrates not only a 'marked' discourse distinct from phallogocentric male use of the same metaphor, but also a subversive inscription of women's (pro)creativity that has existed for centuries" (Friedman 51). Friedman notes that the metaphor's history separates creation from procreation. Although female bodies can biologically procreate, in the patriarchal imagination, only the male mind possesses the capacity to artistically create (Friedman 51). Therefore, through the reader's awareness of Bradstreet's biological reproductive capacity, her use of the metaphor combines procreativity with creativity, announcing that procreation can inform creation (Friedman 76). While Friedman also claims that female use of the metaphor "allows the tenor and vehicle to mingle and fuse," this is not true across Bradstreet's corpus (Friedman 59). Acknowledging Bradstreet's position as a mother does blur the line between tenor and vehicle in her rendering of the metaphor, but it does not erase it. As later explored in this chapter, selections such as "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" and "The Author to Her Book," possess similarities in their poetic depiction of birth. But as their titles suggest, they remain distinct due to the type of birth, physical or poetic, they represent. After recognizing authorship and motherhood as unique subjects in her works, one can identify recurring themes and significant differences between the two topics.

Passive and In Pain: Bradstreet's Early Mothers

Returning to "Upon a Fit of Sickness," Bradstreet offers a glimpse into her initial view of women as passive in birth. While she primarily uses the poem to muse on her seemingly imminent death, she reverses her thoughts from life's conclusion to its beginning as she questions "for what's this life but care and strife / since first we came from womb?" (Bradstreet

240). Due to the term's rare appearance in her other works, "womb" causes one to question its place in her earliest known poem. Perhaps, the word emerged on the page due to Bradstreet's underlying desire for children and worries about her own potentially infertile womb. While interesting to speculate on how "womb" wandered into the poem, its journey does not change its meaning. In other early works, Bradstreet metaphorizes death as a return to the earth's womb and does not reference the organ's reproductive capabilities. For example, in "Of the Four Humours," Earth's daughter Melancholy muses "Then who's man's friend, when life and all forsakes? / His mother, mine, him to her womb retakes: / Thus he is ours, his portion is the grave" (Bradstreet 47). Instead of considering the womb as a figurative site of destruction, "Upon a Fit of Sickness" portrays the womb as a generative space, questioning "For what's this life but care and strife / since first we came from womb?" (Bradstreet 240). By generally referring to "womb" instead of "the womb," she depicts the organ as an idea or force separate from the female body. She follows seventeenth-century medical thinking of womb rather than mothers as dominant in childbirth. In privileging the womb, Bradstreet disregards women's importance in childbirth, shrinking a mother's role in generation to a subhuman essence. Here, she also discloses an initial conception of women as passive in reproduction, subject to the forces of their bodies.

Despite giving birth to seven children between 1633 and 1650, Bradstreet in her early work furthers the conventional description of women's passivity in childbirth. This view spills into other selections from her early period of writing, including "A Letter To Her Husband Absent Upon Public Engagement." Bradstreet drafted "A Letter to Her Husband" in 1639, four years after moving from Boston to the frontier settlement of Ipswich, and one year after delivering her third child. Compounding the stresses of raising a family and managing a household, the move to Ipswich proved especially hard for Bradstreet. The relocation meant that

for the first time in her life, Bradstreet was separated from her natal family (Gordon 175). At the same time, her husband Simon took on additional responsibilities in the colonial government that required him to travel to Boston for extended periods of time, leaving Bradstreet even more isolated (Gordon 199). "A Letter to Her Husband" outlines Bradstreet's heartache and woes during her time apart from Simon.

At home with her three children, she asks him "In this dead time, alas, what can I more / Than view those fruits which through thy heat I bore?" (Bradstreet 246). Bradstreet follows humoral medicine's belief that due to men's position as the warmer sex, they provide the heat needed for the formation of the fetus. Elsewhere in the poem she comments on this masculine heat, writing Simon's "warmth such frigid colds did cause to melt" (Bradstreet 246). She becomes debilitated by his departure as her "chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn" (Bradstreet 246). Her reliance on Simon's heat implies her body's own weakness. By default, the female body becomes a passive and frail space that requires men to trigger changes within. Although Bradstreet does not bestow women with an equal role in conception of the fetus, she notes her efforts in her children's deliveries. She actively declares that "I bore" her offspring. In doing so, Bradstreet splits control over reproduction between herself and Simon. While she reigns over parturition, Simon remains dominant in engendering their children. As Valeria Finucci highlights, since men did not have physical control over childbirth, "fathers could only hope they engendered the fetuses their companions were carrying" (Finucci 41). In "A Letter to Her Husband," Bradstreet conforms to this paternal hope, reinforcing Simon's primary influence over the formation of their children. She describes them as "true living pictures of their father's face" (Bradstreet 246). While seventeenth-century medical doctrines state a variety of reasons for why a child resembles a certain parent, Crooke theorizes that one parent's seed has "the upper hand"

(Crooke 309). He claims that "so the children become always like unto their Parents; wholly to the father if the fathers seede doe always and totally overcome" (Crooke 311). By noting her children's physical similarities with their father, Bradstreet suggests that Simon's seed overtook hers. Her contribution to procreation is comparatively insignificant, thus reinforcing her passive role in childbirth.

Six years after composing "A Letter to Her Husband" and two children later, Bradstreet's body and mind were once again impregnated in 1645. This time Bradstreet fused her two fertile states, making her impending sixth delivery the subject of her poem fittingly entitled, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children." The poem details her somber emotions and consuming fear of death in the moments preceding her travail, exemplifying the emotional stress childbirth brought colonial women. As Chapter One highlights, expecting mothers rightfully feared childbirth due to a combination of high maternal mortality rates and alarming public discourse on birth. Following Mather's advice, Bradstreet readied herself for potential death during labor, using her poetry as a tool to reflect on life's fleetingness and her worldly relationships. "Before the Birth" begins with a blanket statement pronouncing that "all things within this fading world hath end, / Adversity doth still our joys attend" (Bradstreet 243). In addition to relating the emotional pain expecting women faced, the poem portrays mothers as expendable. After her general musings on death's assuredness, she relates her more pressing worry, that Simon and her children might forget her after her death. Exposing this selfish fear for Puritan standards, she instructs Simon to:

> Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
> And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
> These O protect from step-dame's injury.
> And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,

With some sad sighs honour my absent hearse (Bradstreet 244).

Her simple postmortem requests to read her poetry and "with some sad sighs" honor her memory highlight a sustained motif of the unappreciated mother in her early work. Unable to even remain in their family's memories after death, Bradstreet's early poems depict mothers as helpless and replaceable, contributing to the presentation of weak maternal figures.

Concurrent with her meek and downtrodden self-presentation in physical reproduction, she also portrays herself as inactive and barren in poetic creation, demonstrating an overlap between procreation and creation. Amid her childbearing years, Bradstreet penned an elegy to French poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, recounting her admiration and gratitude for his work. While she praises Du Bartas's verses, she minimizes her own poetic ability. The elegy's final couplet reflects on her incapacity to properly commemorate him, conceding that "I'll leave thy praise to those who shall do thee right, / Good will, not skill, did cause me bring my mite" (Bradstreet 208). Unlike her insecurities regarding physical childbirth, Bradstreet's apologies for her literary skill follow seventeenth-century formulae for poetic humility. Eileen Margerum demonstrates that Bradstreet's self-mockeries actually "reveal her self-assurance rather than her self-doubt" (Margerum 153). Ivy Schweitzer demonstrates that Bradstreet had to follow this literary convention set by men in order to be taken seriously. However, Schweitzer claims that while she follows the tradition of authorial reluctance, she still selects images and words relevant to her condition to "stake out her own territory" on male turf (Schweitzer 307).

To illustrate, she relies on maternal images to create her self-deprecatory account in "In Honor to Du Bartas" (1641). She recruits the childbirth metaphor to compliment Du Bartas's poetic prowess, erupting "O pregnant brain, O comprehension vast" (Bradstreet 207). Of her own brain, Bradstreet refers to herself as "weak brained I" (Bradstreet 206). Her weak brain cannot

compare to Du Bartas's fruitful mind. By only allowing Du Bartas to become impregnated with ideas, Bradstreet relies on the traditional procreativity versus creativity division; although Du Bartas cannot procreate, only he creates within the elegy. Additionally, she writes that he exemplifies "the quintessence of an heroic brain" (Bradstreet 207). This grouping of pregnant brains with heroic brains allows fecundity to assume a positive and strong connotation: a pregnant brain is a noble brain. Unlike her former literal references to gestation in "Upon a Fit of Sickness" and "A Letter to Her Husband," this metaphorical invocation of pregnancy views the state as empowering and desired. Although she depicts pregnancy in a positive light here, Bradstreet still refuses to announce her own poetic fecundity, indicating her hesitation to take command of her figurative and literal pregnancies.

Barrenness, as well as parturition, serve as frequent metaphors for Bradstreet, reflecting the emotional toll infertility brought hopeful, young Puritan wives. As Bethany Reid highlights in her study of childbirth metaphors in Bradstreet's work, barrenness "is an image that gives us pause" (Reid 522). Scholars of Bradstreet halt at this image due to her own difficulty to conceive. While at the time of writing "In Honor to Du Bartas," Bradstreet had already delivered four children, she did not birth her first child until five years after marrying Simon. Aware of the Puritan expectation to deliver children immediately after marriage, Bradstreet became distressed by this delay in childrearing. She later reflects that "it pleased God to keep me a long time without a child, which was a great grief to me and cost me many prayers and tears before I obtained one …" (Bradstreet 264). Barrenness appears in the poem as Bradstreet imagines Du Bartas's poetry as rays of sunlight that warm her sterile creative landscape:

> Reflection from their beaming altitude
>
> Did thaw my frozen heart's ingratitude;

Which rays, darting upon some richer ground,

Had caused flowers and fruits soon to abound;

But barren I my daisy here do bring,

A homely flower in this my latter spring, (Bradstreet 205).

As she requires Simon's heat for physical conception, Bradstreet requires Du Bartas's heat to thaw her frozen heart and spur her poetic impregnation. Timothy Sweet comments on this gender dynamic between Du Bartas and Bradstreet, observing that "Du Bartas's poetry is clearly aligned with male power, a power that seemingly cannot be deployed by a feminine subject" (Sweet 161). Here, Bradstreet reinforces her compliant role in reproduction. Despite generating a daisy, she minimizes this poetic birth, calling her poetry a "homely flower." Although she produces a flower, she portrays herself as "barren I."

At first, her emphasis on barrenness seems odd in light of her four successful deliveries at the time of the elegy's completion in 1641. One questions why she focuses on infertility rather than more gratifying aspects of childrearing. However, Reid postulates that precisely because of Bradstreet's reproductive success, she could use barrenness as a metaphor. Reid argues that after giving birth in 1633, "baby Samuel opened Bradstreet's mind to new metaphors. No longer womb-barren, she was free to use the metaphor of barrenness to express her frustration with poetry" (Reid 523). In addition to expressing her frustration with poetry, Bradstreet's inclusion of barrenness suggests her real-life difficulties and frustrations. Given societal pressures to reproduce, one can reasonably assume that her childless years left her feeling isolated and unworthy, similar to her experience as a female poet writing within a male-dominated genre.

Power through Suffering: Bradstreet's Ironic Maternal Metaphors

Reading "In Honor of Du Bartas" alongside Bradstreet's biography reveals the irony in Bradstreet's use of barrenness. Although she laments her infertility and wishes for "some richer ground," she has both delivered children and composed poetry. Moreover, barrenness itself becomes a productive metaphor through which to conform to conventions of poetic humility and explore her relationship with Du Bartas's poetry. Barrenness serves as an apt comparison for Bradstreet to affect modesty. As Schweitzer notes, "The ability to 'give birth' to poetic flowers is female and ought to be hers, but she unlike other poets described as 'some richer ground,' is 'barren'" (Schweitzer 296). Her use of barrenness within the convention of poetic humility, a convention set by men, illustrates the irony of affecting modesty in the first place. As she can physically give birth, she should be able to poetically reproduce on her own terms, without limitations imposed by a male canon. Therefore, Bradstreet strategically selects barrenness as her metaphor to suggest the inequality female writers face when composing in male-dominated genre.

Ultimately, through speaking of barrenness, she transforms her originally infertile state into a poetically fruitful one. This phenomenon of refashioning aspects of her maternal experience into productive metaphors is not limited to barrenness. "In Honor of Du Bartas" also draws upon her encounters with a fussy child to metaphorize her muse. To downplay her intellect and fulfil the *topos* of modesty, she poses that "My muse unto a child I may compare …" (Bradstreet 206). She continues that after learning of the world's bright treasures, the child "At night turns to his mother's cot again, / And tells her tales (his heart over-glad) … But finds too soon his want of eloquence, / The silly prattler speaks no word of sense" (Bradstreet 206). While

Bradstreet reduces her muse to a "silly prattler," her use of her childrearing experiences to reimagine this muse highlights her poetic capabilities.

In addition to demonstrating Bradstreet's ability to fasten her daily surroundings into poetic inspiration, her creation of a male childlike muse indicates her reworking of generic conventions. Sweet explores this idea in his review of gender and genre in Bradstreet's early elegies, arguing that Bradstreet deconstructs the traditional gendered relationship between feminine muse and masculine poet in seventeenth-century poetry. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* illustrates this gendered relationship, as his feminine muse becomes an object that is able to withhold poetic inspiration similar to how an "objectified woman withhold[s] sexual favors" (Sweet 157). Sweet argues that by comparing her muse to a male child, Bradstreet demonstrates that "both the gender and the sexuality of the muse are always only represented, never 'natural.' The reification of gender is neither affirmed nor denied in this citation of convention; instead, it is exposed and deconstructed through a reversal that gives voice to the voiceless gender" (Sweet 163). Not only does Bradstreet craft ironic metaphors to showcase her literary ability, but she also activates the metaphors to criticize the male-dominated genre within which she writes.

Bradstreet's distillation of poetic fuel from maternal experiences appears throughout her early work, spilling into political poems, such as "A Dialogue between Old England and New; Concerning Their Present Troubles." Composed in 1642, the poem comments on the colonists' desire to remain in New England despite tension across the Atlantic between King Charles and the Puritans. "A Dialogue" presents a conversation between Old and New England, imagining the two lands as a mother and daughter respectively. As Charlotte Gordon notes, Bradstreet's personification of England as a mother figure was not new. For example, John Milton crafted a sorrowful mother England in a critical essay regarding King Charles's rule, stating that "'O if we

could but see the shape of our dear mother England … in a mourning weed, with ashes upon her head, and tears abundantly flowing from her eyes'" (Gordon 206). Over a century later, Thomas Paine also imagined the American colonies as a child in his explosive pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776). Paine rails against claims that the colonies still required England's support, arguing that "we may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty" (Paine). Although treading a common path, Bradstreet expands upon this metaphor and creates a dynamic conversation between Old and New England to comment on her political moment, weaving her own maternal insight into the fabric of the poem.

Similar to previous selections from Bradstreet's early work, "A Dialogue between Old England and New" (1642) presents mother England as sorrowful and passive. To illustrate, Old England asks her daughter "Art ignorant indeed of my woes? / Or must my forced tongue these griefs disclose? / And must myself dissect my tattered state" (Bradstreet 191). Given that Bradstreet birthed her fifth child in the same year as writing the poem, her representation of a suffering and tattered mother hints at Bradstreet's birthing experiences, stressing the hardships of motherhood in the colonies. Additionally, Bradstreet depicts Old England as unassertive. The poem begins with New England coercing her mother to speak of her malady, questioning "What ails thee hang thy head and cross thine arms? / And sit i' th' dust, to sigh these sad alarms?" (Bradstreet 191). Resistant to speak, Old England criticizes her daughter for forcing her tongue. Considering the power dynamics between who speaks and who remains silent, Bradstreet reverses the expected relationship between children and parents. The reader expects Old England to control the conversation due to her parental position; however, New England speaks first. Far from requiring her mother's care and guidance, New England dominates the discussion. This

inversion of power stresses Old England's incapacity to fulfill her maternal duties and advocate for herself, leaving her reliant on her daughter for assistance.

The power dynamic created through speaking or not speaking continues in the poem's final sections, where Old England reveals her pitiful and economical relationship with her daughter. In Old England's final monologue, she lists a series of tragedies occurring within England, including "my plundered towns, my houses' devastation, / My weeping virgins and my young men slain" (Bradstreet). She ends this list by lamenting that "The poor they want their pay, their children's bread, / Their woeful mothers' tears unpitied" (Bradstreet 197-198). Through referencing actual, woeful English mothers, Bradstreet shifts the poem from the metaphorical to the literal. With this image of weeping mothers in mind, one reads Old England's ultimate words as representative of physical mothers' griefs and hopes. She states that:

> If any pity in thy heart remain,
> Or any childlike love thou dost retain,
> For my relief, do what their lies in thee,
> And recompense that good I've done to thee (Bradstreet 198).

By equating childlike love with pity, Bradstreet suggests that New England will only aid her old mother out of guilt. Moreover, to guarantee that New England has not forgotten her mother's care, Old England concludes her speech with a reminder of the "good I've done to thee" (Bradstreet 198). This reminder in combination with her earlier use of the word "recompense" generates a transactional mood. Old England's relationship to her daughter has morphed from one of mutual love into an obligatory exchange. By the end of Old England's laments, the reader pities her desperate relationship with her daughter rather than her political crises. Through Bradstreet's former invocation of actual mothers, she primes the reader to consider this

transformation of love into obligation outside the confines of the poem's metaphor. Like many mothers, Bradstreet most likely fears her changing relationship with her children as they age.

Luckily for Old England, New England springs to the former's aid. She has the final word and cements her dominant position in their relationship. Important for the purposes of this project, New England reveals crucial themes in Bradstreet's depictions of motherhood. Over the course of the poem, New England becomes her mother's healer and finds the medicine "to cure this woe" (Bradstreet 192). She extracts the remedy in the fall of Catholicism—or, as she names the religion, "Rome's whore …" (Bradstreet 199). New England proudly reflects on her aid, telling her mother to:

> … cease complaints and wipe your eyes,
> Shake off your dust, cheer up, and now arise;
> You are my mother nurse, and I your flesh,
> Your sunken bowels gladly would refresh;
> Your griefs I pity, but soon hope to see,
> Out of your troubles much good fruit to be, (Bradstreet 198).

In these six lines, Bradstreet reveals three motifs found in her representations of motherhood: the organic mother-child bond, the mother's role as caregiver, and the belief that pain precedes joy. Regarding the first theme of an intense mother-child connection, the following lines are noteworthy: "You are my mother nurse, and I your flesh, / Your sunken bowels gladly would refresh" (Bradstreet 198). This quote reveals a deep bodily link between mother and child, as New England refers to herself as her mother's flesh. Their corporeal connection allows mother and daughter to remain attached and attuned to each other's pain, even when physically separated. These lines also demonstrate the second motif as New England refers to her mother as

"mother nurse," depicting mothers as caregivers. In regard to the third theme, that suffering precedes joy, Bradstreet's corpus often highlights this belief. For example, "Upon a Fit of Sickness" reflects how her illness offered her a greater appreciation of prosperity. "A Dialogue" carries this belief from ailment to motherhood. As Abram Van Engen discusses in his reading of the poem, "far from sharing emotions, New England seems to rejoice at her mother's sorrows. Suffering appears to the daughter as the first sign of peace. Old England's troubles are in that sense, labor pains" (Van Engen). Van Engen highlights how Bradstreet's ordering of suffering before peace mirrors childbirth itself, as labor pains bring her prosperity and posterity.

Recognizing this maternal sequence of pain before production allows one to understand Bradstreet's composition process and insightful metaphors. While she experiences hardships and trials, such as barrenness and labor, she folds these difficulties into her poetry. Through recounting her painful experiences, she ironically amasses an armory of metaphors to fortify her poetry. She employs these same weapons in "A Dialogue," using a mother's sorrow to comment on English politics. As the next section analyzes, this transition from pain to production also becomes an active transition from pain to power.

Active and Aching: Bradstreet's Evolving Maternal Figures

The Tenth Muse (1650) complicates Bradstreet's depiction of childbirth, as she begins to place women in control of reproduction. During Bradstreet's lifetime, *The Tenth Muse* was her only published work, and its controversial publication history remains as discussed as the poems themselves. In 1647, Bradstreet's brother-in-law, John Woodbridge journeyed from Massachusetts to England to help navigate debates between King Charles and Parliament (Hensley xlix). Transporting more than just political guidance across the Atlantic, Woodbridge

also carried selections from Bradstreet's poetry to publish while abroad. Some scholars, such as Lutes, claim that Woodbridge published *The Tenth Muse* "without [Bradstreet's] knowledge or consent" (Lutes 331). However, Bradstreet most likely knew of her poems intended publication, as she sent poems to Woodbridge for inclusion in the original manuscript (Hensley xlix). Regardless of her knowledge of the poems' intended fate, in order to publish a woman's writings, Woodbridge had to assemble a group of respected men to testify to Bradstreet's virtue and modesty to safely bring the volume to print. *The Tenth Muse*'s introduction includes eleven individual approvals of her work (Gordon 243). In 1650, *The Tenth Muse Sprung Up Lately in America* was published, gaining popularity in both Old and New England (Gordon 250). With this collection, Bradstreet became not only colonial America's first published poet, but a successful one at that.

Due to the limitations and stigmas surrounding seventeenth-century female writers, Bradstreet could not overtly speak of women's strength in childbirth. Rather, she slips powerful portrayals of mothers into *The Tenth Muse*'s longest section, her quaternions. The quaternion form divides a single theme into four parts, reflecting the term's formal definition: a group of four things. Bradstreet originally pens a series of four quaternions: "The Four Elements," "Of the Four Humours in Man's Constitution," "Of the Four Ages of Man," and "The Four Seasons of the Year." In her exploration of feminine symbols in these selections, Alice Henton discovers solely feminine procreations, claiming that "… many of the poems in *The Tenth Muse* dispense with fathers (and husbands) altogether to focus on female relationships and assert women's authority" (Henton 316). Bradstreet imagines the four elements as four sisters, each sister individually birthing one of the humors. The quadruplet female humors also reproduce alone to create each age of man. Although this cycle of solely feminine reproduction ends with the four

men, Henton observes that "… whereas their elemental mothers and grandmothers are admirable, the male progeny are pathetic" (Henton 317). The poems' dismissal of male figures from reproduction labels the quaternions as one of Bradstreet's first representations of women as active agents in childbirth.

While she generates this powerful maternal space between the poems, as female characters cyclically reproduce quaternions filled with women, Bradstreet continues to depict childbirth as painful and shameful within the quaternions themselves. This tension between overarching structure and sentence-level meaning hints at the complexity of childbirth, indicating that Bradstreet can view birth as both painful and productive, joyous and jolting. Her most direct reference to physical birth occurs in "Of the Four Ages of Man," when Childhood reflects on his own delivery, wailing "Ah me! Conceived in sin and born in sorrow" (Bradstreet 56). Once again, childbirth is a painful and somber occasion. Childhood continues to refer to his birth as his "… mean beginning blushing can't reveal, / But night and darkness must with shame conceal" (Bradstreet 56). Further stressing the necessity to hide a woman's labor, Childhood writes that:

> My mother's breeding sickness I will spare,
> Her nine months weary burthen do not declare
> To show her bearing pains, I should do no wrong
> To tell those pangs which can't be told by tongue (Bradstreet 56).

Bradstreet's shameful depiction of delivery combined with her consistent silence regarding midwifes and female birth attendants makes one question whether seventeenth-century social childbirth was the supportive, domestic space modern scholars tout it as. Nancy Schrom Dye questions this utopian view of colonial birth, stating that "this picture alone … is distorted. There is much evidence that birth was often a terrifying ordeal" (Dye 99). In addition to fear of death in

childbirth, labor could be a potentially isolating occasion for young colonial women. For example, one recalls Elizabeth Emerson's interrogatory labor from Chapter One. However, Bradstreet's married status and colonial connections probably protected her from a labor as jarring as Emerson's. More likely, Bradstreet could not speak of social childbirth in detail for the same reason that protected the colonial birthing chamber from male intruders: birth was not a public topic. The private feminine sphere remained separate from public literary discourse. Additionally, as demonstrated by Mather's "Retired Elizabeth" in Chapter One, society discouraged women from expressing either pain or joy in birth. Recognizing the boundaries surrounding how women could publicly speak of childbirth, Bradstreet's writing about pain itself becomes an important reclamation of her dynamic experience of giving birth.

Although Childhood vows to not reveal his mother's suffering, he continues to do just that. Lutes summarizes how "Bradstreet employs a double-voiced discourse here, declaring the 'weary burden' by saying that she could not declare it" (Lutes 326). Following these initial "double-voiced" disclosures, Bradstreet uses the space to present a mother's suffering and sacrifices, as Childhood expands that:

> With tears into the world I did arrive;
>
> My mother still did waste as I did thrive,
>
> Who yet with love and all alacrity,
>
> Spending, was willing to be spent for me.
>
> With wayward cries I did disturb her rest,
>
> Who sought still to appease me with the breast (Bradstreet 56).

As she did in her depiction of Old England, Bradstreet portrays the mother in pain, wasting as her child thrives. Also reminiscent of "A Dialogue Between Old England and New," Bradstreet

uses transactional language to quantify the mother's care. Her body becomes "willing to be spent" in a currency of affection. However, unlike Old England, this mother does not expect anything in return. While Old England barters her care in exchange for New England's support, Childhood's mother acts out of love and selflessness, demonstrated by her "love and all alacrity." Bradstreet's specific choice of alacrity emphasizes that the mother remains in control of her actions, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines alacrity as "cheerful and ready willingness" ("alacrity," n.). The mother's enthusiasm to nurture her child contrasts with the image of the suffering mother. Moreover, her willingness implies that she has decided to make these sacrifices for her child, showcasing her active control over her behaviors and situation. By portraying the mother as both exhausted and eager, the quaternions reinforce the messiness of motherhood and its inability to be condensed into iambic pentameter and perfect rhymes.

In addition to respecting motherhood's varied meanings, Bradstreet rejects seventeenth-century medical discourse surrounding female bodies and mothers. Lutes argues that Bradstreet's depiction of mothers in the quaternions dissociates the female body from sin. She states that "these depictions of nursing … suggest that pain is an integral aspect of being a mother. Bradstreet sanctifies this particular sort of pain – a pain caused not by the sinful neglect of a duty but by the fulfilment of it – and thus releases it from its link to sin" (Lutes 327). Furthermore, Bradstreet dismisses medical opinions that labeled mothers as helpless and blameworthy in childbirth. Chapter One illustrates how Crooke granted women the least amount of control over childbirth in the birthing process. The infant holds the power to initiate a battle with the womb for freedom. Crooke also accuses the mother of holding her infant in a "prison and dungeon" without nourishment (Crooke 269). Not only does Bradstreet diverge from this thinking, but she reverses it. Instead of blaming the mother for the child's troubles, she accuses the child of

causing the mother's pain. Of his mother, Childhood rhymes that "with weary arms she danc'd, and *By, By,* sung, / When wretched I (ungrate) had done the wrong" (Bradstreet 56). Bradstreet's definitive blaming of the child frees women from the cruel mother trope. In this quote, she also comments on the thankless nature of childrearing and labels Childhood as ungrateful. Most likely informed by her own experiences raising young children, this stanza relates how a mother's work is often undervalued by both children and society. By speaking through Childhood's voice, Bradstreet forges an artistic space to explore the significance of maternity and privilege the mother's emotions.

In this poetic space, she can reclaim control over her ability to both procreate and create. To appreciate her assertion of authority, one must understand attempts to remove Bradstreet's command over her own poems. The most striking example of such an attempt is documented within *The Tenth Muse* itself, in which culprit John Woodbridge makes the strongest case against himself. In Woodbridge's introductory materials to the collection, he implicates himself as he stresses his crucial role in the book's publication. His introductory letter announces his chief role in publication, claiming that "I have presumed to bring to public view, what she resolved should (in such a manner) never seen the sun" (Woodbridge 2). While it is true that Bradstreet could not have published the poems without a male advocate, Woodbridge exaggerates his role in their publication. He continues to claim that "I found that divers had gotten some scattered papers, affected them well, were likely to have sent forth broken pieces, to the author's prejudice, which I thought to prevent, as well as to pleasure those that earnestly desired view of the whole" (Woodbridge 2). Through inserting himself into *The Tenth Muse*'s publication history, Woodbridge fashions himself as the seed needed to fertilize Bradstreet's official literary birth –

the heat through which she bears her poems – consequently minimizing her control over her own poetic reproduction.

Continuing to belittle Bradstreet's authority, Woodbridge uses a childbirth metaphor in his introductory poem. His use of the metaphor mocks her ability to raise both her poetic and physical posterity. Reflecting on the potential tragedy of not presenting her poems to the public, Woodbridge writes:

> If't be a fault, 'tis mine, 'tis shame that might
> Deny so fair an infant of its right
> To look abroad; I know your modest mind
> How you will blush, complain, 'tis too unkind:
> To force a woman's birth, provoke her pain,
> Expose her labours to the world's disdain (Woodbridge 5).

Despite Woodbridge's feigned respect for the ethical implications involved in exposing a woman's birthing pains, his employment of the childbirth metaphor further minimizes women's control over their own maternal and literary experiences. He stereotypes Bradstreet as a complaining mother, painting her as unaware of the best future for her children and cruel to refuse her infant "of its right / To look abroad" (Woodbridge 5).

In response to Woodbridge's condescending account, Bradstreet amplifies the childbirth metaphor to regrasp command over her poetry and her maternal instincts in "The Author to Her Book." After examining childbirth and maternal references throughout her early poetry, one should not be surprised that Bradstreet returns to these generative images to answer Woodbridge. Still, "The Author to Her Book's" escalation of these symbols cannot be denied or ignored. Written in 1650, the same year as *The Tenth Muse*'s publication, the poem uses the childbirth

metaphor to create a platform for Bradstreet to publicly proclaim her ownership of the work. Addressing her book, she begins with the following declaration:

> Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
>
> Who after birth didst by my side remain,
>
> Till snatched by friends, less wise than true,
>
> Who thee abroad, exposed to public view (Bradstreet 238).

By claiming the poems as her "ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain," Bradstreet follows theories of maternal impression to announce her creative control of *The Tenth Muse*. Of note, the poems stemmed not from her body, but from her brain. Bradstreet's fertile and fruitful brain aligns her with creation over procreation, stressing her ability to enter the male poetic tradition. Lutes also stresses the significance of this cerebral origin point, stating that her poems "… arise not from the material in her womb reacting to a masculine force but, rather, from the material in her mind reacting to her own need for self-expression" (Lutes 333). Further analyzing Bradstreet's employment of the childbirth metaphor, Bethany Reid concludes that "the power of 'The Author to Her Book' thus wells up from its central paradox: writing of a bastard, malformed child, Bradstreet claimed her poetic legitimacy" (Reid 540). As seen elsewhere in Bradstreet's early work, she forges her maternal experiences into vehicles to enrich her poetry and release her self-expression.

As both Lutes and Reid note, "The Author to Her Book" draws upon images outside her own life to claim her poetic legitimacy. However, they do not consider the role of social childbirth in providing these metaphors to her. Bradstreet's creation of a monstrous child "unfit for light," echoes Mary Dyer and Anne Hutchinson's infamous deliveries, connecting Bradstreet's poetic birth to their actual births. As they did with Dyer and Hutchinson, male

leaders snatched control of Bradstreet's birth, turning her intimate affairs into a public spectacle (Reid 537). Reid notes that Bradstreet and Hutchinson's attempts to reclaim legitimacy links the two women, allowing the reader to understand "the complexities women faced in claiming their own authority, their own voices, in a Puritan society whose workings were dominated by men" (Reid 541). While she insightfully highlights this connection of oppression, Reid does not mention the women's natural bond as colonial mothers. As seen in Chapter One, the colonial model of social childbirth created networks through which women could exchange birthing stories and disperse crucial information. By invoking monstrous births outside her own, Bradstreet's poem reflects the shared nature of childbirth experiences. She is able to absorb another woman's birthing story and transform its information into images and metaphors relevant to her poetry. As she would for a physical birth, Bradstreet calls upon other women's birthing experiences to gain critical information to assist in the successful delivery of "The Author." While one might initially question Bradstreet's lack of explicit representations of midwives and female assistants, through examining Bradstreet's poetry in a sociohistorical context, one can disclose these women's hiding place. Mirroring their supportive and concealed roles during childbirth itself, the women remain in the background, woven into the texture of the poem.

Bradstreet fashions these women's stories to declare control over her work and also to depict mothers' pain. The poem's final lines summarize this twofold representation of mothers as active and suffering, as Bradstreet directs her child how to respond to critics: "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" (Bradstreet 239). As Lutes interprets, "the mother, weak and ineffective as she may be, formed this creation without assistance … The poem asserts the precedence of

Bradstreet's imagination; through it and through the book it describes, she creates something from within herself" (Lutes 333). Although I would argue that she formed her poem with the assistance of other women's birthing stories, her ability to create without a man remains significant. To use Lutes's words, "no masculine creative force … helped to shape the book" (Lutes 333). Unlike the quaternions, which subtly suggest female-driven procreation through form, "The Author" explicitly rejects Woodbridge and any other man's attempts to claim literary paternity, announcing that "If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none" (Bradstreet 239).

While "The Author" progresses to depict mothers as active and forceful, the poem still paints them as ailing. The poem's mother-author speaker might possess control over her book, but she is still "poor" and alone. This dual portrayal of maternal figures as both aching and active provides a fitting summary of Bradstreet's early representation of mothers. Throughout her early work, she associates maternity with pain. Beginning with the sorrow of barrenness, Bradstreet continues to relate women's fear of childbirth and mothers' steadfast suffering. Although she eventually declares women's control of childbirth, this authority does not bring joy. Despite their command, the mothers remain worn out and unappreciated.

As Chapter Three will explore, Bradstreet exhibits pure joy in motherhood only after turning to address her physical children. Her later poems showcase a love and appreciation for motherhood not present in her earlier works. By writing to her children, she escapes public presentation of her poems, allowing her to gain control over how to present her maternal experiences. She no longer needs to be embarrassed of her "rambling brat," as in "The Author," but can demonstrate her exceptional and special connection with her children.

Chapter Three: "Your Affectionate Mother, A.B."

"When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children"

-Joan Didion, *Blue Nights*

Two decades after delivering baby Samuel, Bradstreet entered into travail once more to birth her eighth and final child, John. While John's arrival marked the end of her childbearing era, she continued to produce literary offspring for another seventeen years. As many scholars illustrate, her later works increasingly focus on themes of family and faith. Regarding her late writing period, Eavan Boland muses that "…Bradstreet's poems changed. The subjects closed in. Her feelings, her children, the life of her home, the spirit of her marriage–these, rather than elegies for lost courtiers, became her themes. The music shifted: the volume was turned down; the voice became at once more private and more intense" (Boland 183-184). Through dialing the volume down, Bradstreet offers an intimate portrayal of her motherly concerns in the final two decades of her life, as she readies herself and her children for her approaching death.

Transitioning out of her childbearing years, Bradstreet shifts her focus from childbirth to other divisions between mother and child, including her children's departures from home and her inevitable death. These new separations bring suffering and change, resembling childbirth itself. Her concern over these partings pushes Bradstreet to write directly for her children to offer them guidance and remain present in their thoughts following her death. Despite her worries over separation, she displays a new confidence and tenderness in her later work. In part, Bradstreet can demonstrate these qualities because she is not writing to a public audience. Through addressing her children, Bradstreet liberates herself from expectations surrounding female poets, allowing her to present herself as proud and loving. These changes also arise from the assurance that her poetry will accompany her offspring and help them complete their spiritual births when

she no longer can. By writing to her children, she unites her poetic and physical offspring, using the former to safeguard the latter from harm. Leaving her poetry behind, a weary Bradstreet ultimately welcomes her death, eager to transcend worldly pains and enter into heavenly bliss.

Approaching the final twenty years of her life, Bradstreet experienced a series of severe fevers in 1653, inducing her to compose a spiritual autobiography for her children. In this autobiography, Bradstreet addresses her children for the first time, marking a significant change both in her rhetorical form and her role as a mother. While she primarily uses the autobiography to retell experiences that tested and strengthened her relationship with God, she also redefines her understanding of birth within the text. Faced with illness, Bradstreet fears her premature departure from earth, worried that she has not completed molding her children into devout Christians. Therefore, she records her spiritual autobiography to impart some of her wisdom, stating that "I, knowing by experience that the exhortations of parents take most effect when the speakers leave to speak, and those especially sink deepest which are spoke latest" (Bradstreet 262). The exhortation she wishes to "sink deepest" is knowledge of God's grace and glory.

In this autobiography, she represents her mission to shape her children into proper Puritans as another type of birth, displaying her changing maternal duties. Bradstreet connects her spiritual guidance to physical birth, relating that "I have brought you into the world, and with great pains, weakness, cares, and fears brought you to this, I now travail in birth again of you till Christ be formed in you" (Bradstreet 264). As Rosamond Rosenmeier explores in her study of Bradstreet, Bradstreet's focus on imparting spiritual wisdom to her children earns her the label of "prophetic mother." Rosenmeier sorts Bradstreet's maternal roles into three categories: "that of the creative artistic who gives birth to poems … that of mother and grandmother of literal children … that of a prophetic mother who combines, yet transcends, the first two" (Rosenmeier

142-143). As a prophetic mother, Bradstreet acts as a divine teacher in the name of God. This role was typical of Puritan mothers, as most religious education took place within the home (Moran & Vinovskis 32). No longer occupied with actual childbirth, Bradstreet centers her efforts on her children's spiritual births, becoming a prophetic mother.

As her maternal role transitions from physical to spiritual support, Bradstreet's poetic perspective also evolves. While much of her earlier work elegizes her heroes or comments on political matters, her later period of writing serves both to guide her children and to leave a piece of herself behind. Rosenmeier comments that "It is as if the poet has somehow moved off the world's stage and into the wings where she can wait and watch—of course, sending instruction and counsel for her children from this curious perspective, in which she is both involved and distanced" (Rosenmeier 133). Bradstreet discloses her new mission to advise her children in her autobiography. She explains that she gifts the work to her children so "… that when I am no more with you, yet I may be daily in your remembrance (although that is the least in my aim in what I do now,) but that you may gain some spiritual advantage by my experience" (Bradstreet 263). Her quickness to denounce any attempt to memorialize herself exposes her goal of accomplishing precisely that. She fears leaving her children and resultingly offers them her writings as a method to remember her by. In the autobiography's epigraph, she summarizes her dual aim in writing:

> This book by any yet unread,
> I leave for you when I am dead,
> That being gone, here you may find
> What was your living mother's mind.
> Make use of what I leave in love,

And God shall bless you from above (Bradstreet 262).

Bradstreet's words offer her children both spiritual guidance and a glimpse into her mind, allowing her to remain an active presence in their lives posthumously.

Despite her preparations for death during her 1653 illness, fortune spared Bradstreet. In 1657, she regained her health, declaring that "My winter's past, my storms are gone, / And former clouds seem now all fled" (Bradstreet 279). In addition to feeling a stronger connection with her God following recovery, Bradstreet also believes that her experience can nourish her children's own spiritual relationships. She addresses her children again in a follow-up to her autobiography and postulates that "Thus, dear children, have ye seen the many sicknesses and weaknesses that I have passed through to the end that if you meet with the like you may have recourse to the same God who hath heard and delivered me, and he will do the same for you if you trust in Him" (Bradstreet 280). From her hardships, her children can learn and grow. Her travails, as recorded through Bradstreet's writings, help carry her children to term in their religious birth.

With her recovery, she entered a relatively calm decade of her life: her children matured, the colony expanded, and her faith strengthened. Although these shifts may have brought Bradstreet some peace, her children's departures from home distressed her, much like Simon's business trips some twenty-years prior. Shortly after Bradstreet's illness, Samuel journeyed across the Atlantic to study medicine, apparently inheriting his mother's medical inclination (Rosenmeier 133). Several critics note her strong interest in anatomy (Lutes 314). As a worried mother, Bradstreet responded by composing "Upon My Son Samuel His Going for England" (1657). The poem transfers responsibility for Samuel's protection from herself to God. She states that "I here resign, into Thy hand / The child I stayed for many years" (Bradstreet 281). By

placing Samuel in divine hands, Bradstreet compares herself to God in regard to childrearing. Like God, Bradstreet can defend her child from harm. Through this suggestion of similar power as God, Bradstreet dissents from Christian scripture to not make false idols. Recognizing her potential sin, she clarifies her meaning, adding "He's mine, but more, O Lord, Thine own" (Bradstreet 281). Despite her explanation, she does not completely submit Samuel to God's care. She only claims a smaller share of Samuel's ownership compared to God's portion. Rosenmeier analyzes Bradstreet's exceptional relationship with Samuel, claiming that "Samuel is clearly the child who shared the mother's interests … the relationship echoes the sense of an inheritance of the kind Bradstreet said she shared with her father" (Rosenmeier 140). As her first child, Samuel was Bradstreet's miracle: "the son of prayers, of vows, of tears, / The child I stayed for many years" (Bradstreet 281). Perhaps due to this closeness, Bradstreet cannot bring herself to relinquish her role as Samuel's primary protector, even when entrusting this position to her God.

Bradstreet's shifting maternal role and dwindling control of her children torment her as greatly as the pain of childbirth itself, creating another parallel to birth in her later work. Faced with self-doubt as her children age, Bradstreet once again turns to her steadfast craft and composes "In Reference to Her Children" (1659) to process her woes. While *The New York Times* claims that the term "empty nest" originated in the 1970s, Bradstreet employs the avian metaphor in "In Reference," imagining herself as a mother hen watching her offspring take flight (Better). She begs them to "Leave not thy nest, thy dam and sire, / Fly back and sing amidst this choir" (Bradstreet 253). To express how much suffering her children's voyages cause, she compares her current distress to the pains of childrearing. She muses that:

> Great was my pain when you I bred
>
> Great was my care when you I fed

Long did I keep you soft and warm,

And with my wings kept off all harm,

My cares are more and fears than ever,

My throbs such now as 'fore were never (Bradstreet 255).

Analogous to birth, her transitioning family dynamic brings Bradstreet pain, division and change. To quell her "throbs" and remain in control of her children's adolescent births, she imparts her wisdom to them through poetry.

Poetry consequently becomes an avenue through which to bolster her relationship with her children. When her children leave home, she worries about their potential harm due to their youth and ignorance. She writes to them "Alas, my birds, you wisdom want, / Of perils you are ignorant" (Bradstreet 255). Although she frets about their safety, she understands that her poetry will provide them with the wisdom they need when she is no longer physically present. Therefore, she resolves that "my age I will not once lament / But sing, my time is so near spent" (Bradstreet 255). Her embrace of death's inevitability permits Bradstreet to focus her time on "singing" for her children and bestowing with her knowledge upon them, consequently fulfilling her role as a prophetic mother.

Continuing to document her wisdom, Bradstreet completed a series of aphorisms in 1664, five years after writing "In Reference." Entitled "Meditations Divine and Moral," the collection hosts seventy-seven short entries that often connect commonplace observations to religious maxims. To illustrate, she teaches that "the finest bread hath the least bran, the purest honey the least wax, and the sincerest Christian the least self-love" (Bradstreet 297). In an introductory paragraph to the collection, she dedicates her meditations to her son Simon and outlines her reasons for writing. She states that:

> Parents perpetuate their lives in their posterity and their manners; in their imitation children do naturally rather follow the failing than the virtues of their predecessors, but I am persuaded better things of you. You once desired me to leave something for you in writing that you might look upon, when you should see me no more; I could think of nothing more fit for you nor of more ease to myself than these short meditations following (Bradstreet 295).

This passage displays Bradstreet's shifting sense of audience in her final years. Characteristic of her self-reflective nature, she understands that her words to her children can both enrich their lives and ease her own concerns over leaving them. In this sense, her literary offspring benefit her actual offspring. Knowing that her poetry and other writings remain with her children offers her a sense of security as she readies herself for her eventual death.

Throughout her aphorisms, Bradstreet finds religious meaning in her earthly experience and uses lessons learned in childrearing to inform her messages. In aphorism thirty-nine, she reflects that:

> A prudent mother will not cloth her little child with a long and cumbersome garment; she easily forsees what events it is like to produce, at the best, but falls and bruises or perhaps somewhat worse. Much more will the allwise God proportion His dispensations according to the stature and strength of the person He bestows them on … (Bradstreet 303-304).

Referencing this aphorism, Charlotte Gordon comments that "Anne never failed to draw God into her homespun counsel. In her eyes God became like the 'prudent mother …'" (Gordon 273). Therefore, Bradstreet's childrearing efforts serve her children twice. Her attentiveness first protected them from physical injury before transforming into metaphors to accompany them on

their spiritual journeys. Although her children no longer require her to cut their garments to protect their physical safety, they need her spiritual teachings to prevent them from tripping on their paths to God. In aphorism thirty-eight, Bradstreet also returns to her maternal experiences, metaphorizing breastfeeding to speak of weaning oneself from earthly attachments:

> Some children are hardly weaned; although the teat be rubbed with wormwood or mustard, they will either wipe it off, or else suck down sweet and bitter together. So it is with some Christains: let God embitter all the sweets of this life, that so they might feed upon more substantial food …" (Bradstreet 303).

As mentioned in Chapter One, male leaders often invoked a breastfeeding metaphor to speak of relinquishing mortal affections. One recalls Mather's instruction to ask God to "*Wean me [from] this World*" (Mather 239). However, Samantha Cohen Tamulis notes that Bradstreet's aphorism provides a rare example of a female author employing the metaphor. She claims that Bradstreet's words "imply the incredible power of a mother's body, which provides a particularly apt metaphor for the godly" (Cohen Tamulis 372).

Bradstreet's indication of the power of the female body displays her divergence from seventeenth-century medical discourse and reflects her newfound confidence in mothering. In her late work, Bradstreet depicts both her female body and brain as strong and capable. This authority opposes Galenic medicine's hierarchal positioning of the female body as weaker than the male body. Under the guise of an unspecified "prudent mother," Bradstreet allows herself to acknowledge her expertise in raising children, as she "easily forsees" mishaps and injuries. Her body can nurture her children and her brain can anticipate and circumvent harm. In this later stage of her life, she portrays her own mental and physical authority in childrearing, no longer waiting for a male's heat to warm her forlorn "chilled limbs" (Bradstreet 246).

Bradstreet also declares her active and instrumental role in "In Reference to Her Children." A sense of pride for her childrearing abilities emerges as she reflects that she:

> … did what could be done for young
> And nursed you up till you were strong,
> And 'fore she once would let you fly,
> She showed you joy and misery;
> Taught what was good, and what was ill,
> What would save life, and what would kill (Bradstreet 256).

As she writes to her children, she assumes control of her role as a literal mother. She alone nursed and taught her children. She alone defended them from harm and kept them "soft and warm" (Bradstreet 255). Her assertion of her maternal abilities places her as the active agent in generation. As seen in Chapter Two, Bradstreet's early work portrays Simon as dominant in engendering their children in the womb. He holds the power to shape the soft matter of her womb into children (Park 262). However, Bradstreet has shaped her children into proper Puritans. In doing so, she becomes active and dominant in her children's moral development. Her central role in their spiritual development guarantees that her children will not forget her. She does not need to beg her children to remember her, like her poetic representation of Old England. Instead, she asks them to speak to her grandchildren of her love: "In chirping language, oft them tell, / You had a dam that loved you well" (Bradstreet 256). Through her years of devotion for her children, she foretells that even when she is "thus gone, amongst you I may live" (Bradstreet 256).

By recognizing that her maternal success will conserve her memory, Bradstreet relieves her fear of dying. A brief comparison of "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" (1645) to "In

Reference to Her Children" (1659) allows one to observe Bradstreet's lessened anxiety surrounding death. While both poems conclude with a farewell to her family, their tones are markedly different. "Before the Birth" instructs Simon to pity his woeful, pregnant wife and "… kiss this paper for thy love's dear sake, / Who with salt tears this last farewell did take" (Bradstreet 244). In contrast, "In Reference" ends with a jubilant exclamation, as Bradstreet shouts "farewell, my birds, farewell adieu, / I happy am, if well with you" (Bradstreet 256). At the time of writing "In Reference," Bradstreet has proven herself a capable mother, allowing her to banish the uncertainty that plagued her prepartum thoughts in "Before the Birth." She knows her children will remember her maternal capacity and affection after her death. And precisely through this knowledge, Bradstreet finds peace in death.

In addition to comforting Bradstreet, the fusion of her two reproductive labors allows her to provide an arguably more candid account of her maternal experience. When she previously addressed public audiences, she had to filter her writings to protect herself against potential criticism as a female poet. Adrienne Rich notes "least of all in a woman poet would radical powers be encouraged. Intellectual intensity among women gave cause for uneasiness …" (Rich xiv). Cohen Tamulis also highlights the hostile environment female writers faced, pointing to John Winthrop's diagnosis of insanity in another colonial woman poet, Ann Hopkins. He writes that Hopkins lost:

> … her understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her divers years by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing … [I]f she had attended to her household affairs and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits (Cohen Tamulis 373).

In her prologue to *The Tenth Muse* (1650), Bradstreet reflects the stigmas surrounding female writers. Guarding herself from potential criticism of her public poems, she states that:

> 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 (Bradstreet 16).

Shifting her audience and addressing her children allowed Bradstreet to lower her guard and escape these stereotypes and ideological traps surrounding female writers.

No longer configuring her maternal experience to cater to external expectations, Bradstreet is able to reveal her affection for her children. When previously writing for a public audience, Bradstreet depicts motherhood as powerful and distressing, as message she used to carve her place within the male literary tradition. For example, "The Author to Her Book" creates an active maternal speaker to rebut Woodbridge's claim of literary paternity. Additionally, Lutes finds that Bradstreet's public poems use motherhood to subvert religious and medical connections of the female body with sin, arguing that "when [Bradstreet] conceptualized 'woman' as mother, she created a position from which she could reject or ignore the association of the female body with inherent physical and spiritual weakness" (Lutes 337). These interpretations focus on Bradstreet's fashioning of motherhood to challenge sexist assumptions surrounding female writers. In contrast, when Bradstreet writes to her children, she can pause and step back from her proto-feminist work. Freed from audiences' expectations, she can offer a tender reflection on her twenty-plus years of mothering.

Despite her sorrow regarding her children's departures, "In Reference to Her Children" ultimately demonstrates the joy Bradstreet finds in her emotional connection with her children, as she pronounces that "I happy am, if well with you" (Bradstreet 256). Her connection with her children transcends all boundaries including death. If they are well, she is happy. This unique mother-child relationship also emerges outside of the confines of her poems, spilling into her signature. At the conclusion of many of her "domestic" poems, Bradstreet includes the signature "A.B." Her initials appear at the bottom of personal selections such as, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," "A Letter to Her Husband," "To Her Father with Some Verses," and "Upon the Burning of Our House." However, only when writing to her son Simon does Bradstreet sign her work, "*your affectionate mother*, A.B." (Bradstreet 295). She never signs as her husband's devoted wife or her father's loving daughter. In fact, no other writing of Bradstreet's includes this expanded signoff, demonstrating her affection towards Simon and the special connection she shares with her children.

As this strong connection brings Bradstreet peace and comfort, her boundless bond with her children also leaves her vulnerable to agony and heartache. While she lost none of her own children either during or following childbirth, she lost four of her grandchildren between 1665 and 1670. Following the deaths of her grandchildren, Elizabeth, Anne and Simon, Bradstreet composed three elegies in their honor. Although Bradstreet also wrote elegies for her mother and father, her poems to her grandchildren display a greater level of emotion and grief, signifying her poignant relationship with her offspring. In her poem for her father (1653), she sings his praise similar to her glorification of Du Bartas and Philip Sidney in other works. She minimizes personal affection throughout the poem and states her direct motivation for writing: "He was my father, and I'll praise him still" (Bradstreet 216). Her elegy for her mother (1643) also feels

relatively devoid of familial warmth, as she sorts her mother's life into the following roles: "A worthy matron of unspotted life / A loving mother and obedient wife / A friendly neighbor, pitiful to poor" (Bradstreet 219). In contrast, when Bradstreet writes of her grandchildren, she reveals both her love for them and grief over their deaths. To illustrate, "In Memory to My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet" (1665) creates a mournful and sentimental mood through its anaphoric opening of "Farewell dear babe, my heart's too much content / Farewell sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye, / Farewell fair flower that for a space was lent" (Bradstreet 257).

Four years later, this emotion reappears in her elegy for her namesake, Anne. However, in this selection, Bradstreet focuses on her own sorrow, revealing life's constant fluctuations between pain and joy. Her rhyming couplets reflect on her precarious existence:

> With trembling heart and trembling hand I write,
> The heavens have changed to sorrow my delight.
> How oft with disappointment have I met,
> When I on fading things my hopes have set.
> Experience might 'fore this have made me wise,
> To value things according to their price.
> Was ever stable joy found below?
> Or perfect bliss without a mixture of woe? (Bradstreet 258).

At the time of penning these questions, Bradstreet was fifty-seven years old. And in these fifty-seven years, she migrated to the American colonies, overcame various severe illnesses, suffered through infertility, lost her home in a fire, and witnessed four of her grandchildren's deaths. Perhaps due to these earthly trials and others, she believed that "experience might 'fore this have made me wise" (Bradstreet 258). As her emotions oscillated from bliss to sorrow for nearly sixty

years, her body also transitioned between pain and joy for twenty of these years. Between 1633 and 1652, Bradstreet entered a constant reproductive cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and weaning, delivering on average a child every 2.4 years. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich comments on this distinctly feminine cycle, noting that "each cycle of reproduction was marked by epicycles, recurring patterns of restraint and release, pain and deliverance, sorrow and celebration" (Ulrich 144). While Bradstreet's body fluctuated between reproductive stages, her emotions progressed on a similar sinusoidal wave of pain and joy. As her poetry demonstrates, she found happiness in conception, suffering and fear in childbirth, and love after delivering her children. Although she experienced moments of bliss, these peaks were not sustained, leading her to question "Was ever stable joy found below?" (Bradstreet 258).

By 1669, three years before her death, these unyielding transitions exhausted Bradstreet and prompted her to compose "As Weary Pilgrim." In this late poem, she pines for her death and release from her wordly sorrows. Her words reflect her desire for physical rest as well as mental respite, as she imagines herself as a weary pilgrim with "… wasted limbs now lie full soft" (Bradstreet 321). Bradstreet continues to reflect her body's fatigue, announcing:

Oh, how I long to be at rest

And soar on high among the blest.

This body shall in silence sleep,

Mine eyes no more shall ever weep,

No fainting fits shall me assail,

Nor grinding pains my body frail, (Bradstreet 322).

She anticipates the conclusion of physical pain in death, looking forward to eternal rest and peace. She waits for her final transition from pain to joy, as "a corrupt carcass down it lays, / A

glorious body it shall rise" (Bradstreet 322). Therefore, death becomes her final labor. Pregnant with her trust in God, she awaits her spiritual rebirth and ultimate transcendence from earthly pain to immortal joy.

By the time of her death in 1672, Bradstreet had blossomed from a "homely flower" into a fruitful tree laden with literary and maternal accomplishments. One recalls her New England literary successor Sylvia Plath's words and imagines a wonderful fig hanging from each branch of Bradstreet's life, as one fig was "a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet …" (Plath 77). Rather than leaving the figs to rot, Bradstreet bites into both figs. She combines her literary and poetic posterity, allowing them to benefit one another. In doing so, she navigates what her other successor Adrienne Rich deems "the tension between creative work and motherhood" (Rich xxi). Not only does Bradstreet traverse this ever-present conflict, she does so in an unfamiliar landscape and within a rigid patriarchal social structure. As modern readers, we want to shout Bradstreet's brilliance, becoming tempted to point out moments of Bradstreet's expert combination of motherhood and writing, such as in "The Author to Her Book." However, after reading her entire corpus, one understands these instances do not exist in isolation. Like her body, her life was in constant fluctuation, producing moments of joy, moments of pain, and never "perfect bliss without a mixture of woe" (Bradstreet 258). Therefore, to holistically represent Bradstreet, we must not extrapolate moments of triumph to serve our contemporary aims, but rather recognize her dynamic experiences as a seventeenth-century poet and mother.

Conclusion

> me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.
> I should have known; I should have told
> them something to write down. My voice alarms
> my throat. "Name of father—none." I hold
> you and name you bastard in my arms.
>
> -Anne Sexton, "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward"

In the modern American high school classroom, Anne Bradstreet is presented as the quintessential Puritan woman: devout, modest and domestic. She represents purity and obedience. She is a type of woman long lost, living in an America equally as far removed. Bradstreet's unfortunate description, often dutifully provided before moving on to study *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Crucible*, alienates her from contemporary readers and forces her extraordinary life to conform to modern stereotypes of Puritan women. Her ardor, boldness, curiosity, subtlety and complex emotional palette are omitted, along with her connections to the twenty-first century. One of those connections, I have argued, is her ability to inform our understanding of childbirth in America.

The history of American childbirth is a story of power. In the seventeenth-century, women controlled the birthing chamber, but not the conversation surrounding birth, leading to heightened fears and intense expectations for colonial women. By the mid-eighteenth century, male physicians began to practice obstetrics in America, marking a gradual shift from social to medical childbirth. By the 1920s, men had taken control of reproduction, labeling childbirth as a pathological process in need of heroic intervention (Dye 102). As Nancy Schrom Dye summarizes, "throughout the contemporary period, maternity patients have been expected to be passive, to surrender control of their bodies and the birth process itself to professionals" (Dye 106). As always, within this history, marginalized groups of women experienced a greater loss of

control over their bodies. Commonly cited as a gruesome example of the racist origins of gynecology is J. Marion Sims, the so-called "father of modern gynecology." To earn his fame, he practiced his celebrated surgical techniques on numerous enslaved women, often without anesthesia (Owens 1). Deirdre Cooper Owens reveals the centrality of enslaved women, both in northern and southern states, to the progression of American gynecology, noting how "slavery's existence allowed for the rapid development of this branch of medicine" (Owens 6).

Reflecting on the contemporary state of birth in America, Wertz and Wertz conclude their study of childbirth with the following message:

> Birth is a political, economic, and cultural concern for all citizens. Class divisions in health care and in the safety of birth reflect our social order only too well, and they also reinforce those differences and contribute to the social disorders that disturb us. To be underprivileged at birth is a terrible fate for individuals and for the society into which they are born (Wertz & Wertz 300).

In the twenty-first century, America's birthing system remains plagued with racial and class disparities. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that in 2020, the maternal mortality rate for non-Hispanic Black women was 2.9 times higher than the rate for non-Hispanic white women (Hoyert 1). Even when controlling for maternal risk factors and household characteristics, this racial gap remains (Schoendorf et al.). These facts, combined with America's disgraceful possession of the highest maternal mortality rate among developed countries, places America in a maternal health crisis (Tikkanen et al.). A woman is more likely to die in childbirth today than her mother a decade ago (MacDorman et al.).

Given America's current maternal health crisis, birth narratives become especially important forms of information and reclamation. Through speaking of parturition, mothers can

make meaning of their birthing experiences, regain control over a disempowering experience, and share their knowledge with other birthing persons (Callister 509). Additionally, listening to birth stories can help the communities and structures that surround birth learn how to better support their mothers. Specifically, listening to the narratives of women most marginalized in America's medical birthing system can inform future approaches to remedy the system.

Four hundred years ago, colonial women did not control childbirth discourse. Instead, men in positions of political, medical and religious authority held the power to determine birth's meaning. Anne Bradstreet's poetic interpretations of her birthing experiences are exceptional. She offers a unique opportunity to study colonial birth from a mother's perspective and garner the rewards of doing so. When one reads Bradstreet's entire corpus, her dynamic and multifaceted relationship to childrearing emerges. She demonstrates birth's deeply personal and complex meaning, exhibiting how one woman's perception of parturition can evolve over time. The lessons learned from examining Bradstreet's representations of birth, lessons of change and nuance, can guide our contemporary studies of birth narratives. By casting our attention backwards and studying our earliest poet, we can understand the importance of listening to American mothers with a careful ear and a "thankful heart" (Bradstreet 282).

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