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## The Path to Piety in Anne Bradstreet's "Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of our House July 10, 1666"

### Keywords

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The Path to Piety in Anne Bradstreet's "Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of our House July 10, 1666"

Preston Thompson

*"Oh how sweet it must be, my Mother, to have travelled so far on the road of detachment that one never feels one can ever turn back."*

—Francis Poulenc, *The Carmelites*

Anne Bradstreet's poem "Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of our House July 10, 1666" was first published in 1867. As its title suggests, the poem details Bradstreet's reaction to a fire that consumed her Andover, Massachusetts home. Because of the poem's autobiographical content and its consistency with Puritan ideology, I will use the author's name and the term "speaker" interchangeably throughout this essay. A devoutly Puritan wife and mother, Bradstreet acknowledges her upset at her house's burning while also castigating herself for her attachment to the human and material worlds. Because of the stark difference between her attitudes at the beginning and the end of the poem, and because of the decisiveness and finality with which she turns her attention to God in the last lines, "Here Follows" reads as an allegory of a Puritan's path to piety and proper detachment from earthly concerns and ties. However, though Bradstreet begins with horror and ends with piety, this is not a simple progression. Bradstreet suggests that the path to piety is not linear.

The first section of "Here Follows" concerns Bradstreet's immedi-

ate horror at her house's burning and positions her as a helpless supplicant to God, but it also suggests that she is concerned not only with the earthly. Still, her concerns are *mostly* earthly. It is clear here that the speaker has not yet reached a state of submission to God's will, or a concern mainly with the afterlife rather than this life:

In silent night when rest I took,  
 For sorrow near I did not look  
 I wakened was with thund'ring noise  
 And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.  
 That fearful sound of "Fire!" and "Fire!"  
 Let no man know is my desire.  
 I, starting up, the light did spy,  
 And to my God my heart did cry  
 To strengthen me in my distress  
 And not to leave me succorless.  
 Then, coming out, beheld a space  
 The flame consume my dwelling place. (ll. 1-12)

"Silent night" refers not only to literal darkness and silence. It also serves to indicate the speaker's initial state of ignorance and lack of perception—her undue concern with material things, and, conversely, her failure to recognize the greater importance of spiritual contemplation and insight, which she will turn to by the end of the poem. In the speaker's psychological or spiritual silent night, she is unable to recognize the folly of her concern with earthly things like her house. She is blinded by these concerns. Fittingly, it is fire, which provides light, that will help to rouse her from this blind state.

Immediately one notices Bradstreet's iambic tetrameter couplets. The first syllable of "thund'ring" falls on the stressed syllable of the iamb, producing a rousing effect as the noise bursts into the sleeping speaker's consciousness (l. 3). This is also the first time we encounter the short *U*

vowel sound. Up to this point the verse has been dominated by long *I* sounds and the vowel digraph *oo*. Hence the *U* sound has a jarring effect in the reader's mind, reflecting the speaker's experience of being jolted awake by her family's screams. Overall, the iambs—pairs of differently emphasized beats—mirror the duality of religious conviction and earthly attachment present in the speaker at this point. If we interpret the poem as an allegory of a Puritan's path to pious detachment from worldly things, the coexistence of both this conviction and this attachment in Bradstreet's mind from the very first section of the poem supports the idea that the path to piety she depicts is not a linear journey.

Indeed, despite Bradstreet's concern for her house and family, she already seems to have the afterlife on her mind; the "thund'ring noise," "pit-eous shrieks of dreadful voice," and "fearful sound of 'Fire!' and 'Fire!'" serve to create a feeling of awe in the face of God's might, and they recall musical and artistic depictions of the final judgement (ll. 3-5). For example, one medieval hymn, the "Dies Irae," portrays Judgement Day as a time when "heaven and earth [will] in ashes lay," and when "The mighty trumpet's wondrous tone/shall rend each tomb's sepulchral stone" ("Dies" 2, 7-8). Having grown up in formerly Catholic England and having "read widely" in the library of the Earl of Lincoln, it seems possible that Bradstreet had encountered this famous hymn (Belasco 185). Even if she had not, she would likely be familiar with the passage from the Book of Zephaniah on which the hymn is based ("Dies"). The apocalyptic resonances in "Here Follows" create an atmosphere of foreboding which mirrors Bradstreet's own fear. The repetition of "Fire" emphasizes this ominous feeling. Like a sinner

on Judgement Day, Bradstreet is left pleading with God “To strengthen me in my distress/And not to leave me succorless” (ll. 9-10). The idea of God’s ability to bestow or withhold succor suggests that Bradstreet is at his mercy and feels helpless. Fire might also represent God himself. God is traditionally associated with light, and as we shall see, he has reason to intervene in Bradstreet’s life. The juxtaposition of fire, with its associations with light, and Bradstreet’s “silent night” already implies that Bradstreet has not been living a pious life. Further, Bradstreet’s language evokes not only the larger idea of Judgement Day; the phrases “thundering noise,” “piteous shrieks of fearful voice,” and the “sound of ‘Fire!’” evoke particular auditory sensations, while the very idea of fire suggests heat. Bradstreet’s frequent use of S sounds in the second half of this section—“starting,” “spy,” “strengthen,” “distress”—suggests the hissing of the smoking fire (7-9). These appeals to the reader’s senses add drama to the narrative and help the reader to empathize with the speaker, to experience what she experiences. However, the use of sensory detail also suggests her concern with the physical world at this point. Overall, Bradstreet’s description of her home’s burning at the beginning of the poem suggests both her Christian roots and her failure to live piously, showing the complexity and nonlinearity of her spiritual journey.

Bradstreet has not yet attained the detachment of the end of the poem, but, like her perhaps unconscious allusions to a Christian understanding of the apocalypse, the very act of praying shows that she is not wholly concerned with earthly things. Her repetition of *me* in lines 9 and 10 speaks to her personal connection to God. This personal relationship with God—uncomplicated by the presence of a confessor to mediate one’s

dealings with him—is consistent with Puritan theology (Feldmeth). Perhaps her prayer in these lines is a step toward the piety she will later take on. Her ignorance is not total. The coexistence of earthly and spiritual ideas percolating in the speaker’s mind at this point speaks to the complicated, nonlinear path to piety that she depicts.

In the second section, Bradstreet switches from an attitude of horror and helplessness to a counterintuitive sense of *gratitude* toward God in the face of her house’s burning:

And when I could no longer look,  
I blest His name that gave and took,  
That laid my goods now in the dust.  
Yea, so it was, and so ‘twas just.  
It was His own, it was not mine,  
Far be it that I should repine;  
He might of all justly bereft  
But yet sufficient for us left. (ll. 13-20)

The words “I blest His name that gave and took,” stress God’s right to bestow and recall his gifts to humans. With the acknowledgement that her house “was His own, it was not mine,” the speaker renounces human material ownership. Her insistence that her house’s burning was “just” and that she has been “justly bereft” indicates her understanding that God is completely in control and has good reasons for burning her house. Furthermore, her observation that God has “yet sufficient for us left” suggests an understanding of God as merciful and as a provider even as he takes away her belongings. As a whole, these sentiments do not seem like part of a gradual progression toward religious submission and piety. There is no expression of grief here. It is a complete switch from the horror of the earlier section to

an acknowledgement of God's right to burn her house, his fairness in doing so, and his mercy in providing Bradstreet and her family with necessities, although Bradstreet does not specify which necessities—material resources or spiritual necessities—she is talking about. However, the section's brevity—it is just eight lines—compared with the lengthy materialistic section that follows suggests how quickly one can regress from upright religious zeal to indulgence in material attachment. This inconsistency demonstrates the non-linearity of the path to piety and detachment from earthly concerns as Bradstreet conceives of it.

In the third section of "Here Follows," Bradstreet's lapse into rumination on the loss of her house and treasured objects suggests that one can relapse from a spiritually conscientious attitude to an impious attitude, although some of her words still suggest an awareness that her home's immolation was justified. The rejection of material attachments that characterizes the second section of Bradstreet's poem proves to be short-lived:

When by the ruins oft I past  
 My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,  
 And here and there the places spy  
 Where oft I sat and long did lie:  
 Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,  
 There lay that store I counted best.  
 My pleasant things in ashes lie,  
 And them behold no more shall I.  
 Under thy roof no guest shall sit,  
 Nor at thy table eat a bit.  
 No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,  
 Nor things recounted done of old.  
 No candle e'er shall shine in thee,  
 Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be. (ll. 21-34)

The word "ruins" brings to mind the remains of grand, antique buildings.



Hence Bradstreet's use of this word to describe what is left of her presumably humble and modern house speaks to the house's importance in her mind. In line 29, she switches temporarily from first to second person, using "thy" to speak directly to her house. Her personification of the house further emphasizes its importance to her. Her lamentation of individual objects manifests her resurgent materialism (ll. 25-26). Strikingly, the objects she names, "that trunk" and "that chest," are vessels that hold other things. This implies that the speaker's materialism extends beyond the objects she is naming. Bradstreet returns here to the use of sensory detail that she used at the start of the poem. The word "eat" appeals to the reader's sense of taste. As before, the use of sensory detail is congruent with the speaker's attachment to earthly things.

One might wonder at the fact that Bradstreet mentions her husband among things she will ultimately dismiss as unimportant. However, it would be wrong to read the line "Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be" as implying that Bradstreet's husband is equal in value—or lack of value, as she will ultimately come to understand them as unimportant—to the inanimate objects she names (l. 34). According to historian Laurie Hochstetler, although marriage ceremonies in the early Massachusetts Bay Colony differed from their Anglican counterparts in England, marriage for Puritans was still "filled with religious significance" as a covenant similar to that between human beings and God (489-90). Therefore, Bradstreet cannot be implying that her concern for her husband should ultimately be discarded like her concern for inanimate objects. The emphasis of the line is on Bradstreet's materialistic, nostalgic feelings about the house itself. The line also

gives Bradstreet the opportunity to use more sensory detail. The mention of storytelling and talking, specifically the words “told,” “recounted”, and “heard,” suggest auditory sensations to the reader’s imagination. Once again, Bradstreet’s use of sensory detail suggests her concern with the immediate physical world.

Notably, none of the activities Bradstreet remembers having engaged in inside the house in the passage above have to do with religious devotion, a large part of Puritan life. The words “oft I sat” and “long did lie” in line 24 suggest habitual, excessive inactivity and sloth, which seem inconsistent with the Puritan work ethic (Feldmeth). The telling of stories is frivolous compared to religious contemplation and practice, and the phrase “things recounted done of old” suggests boasting and hence vanity, perhaps her own (ll. 31-32). It also suggests Bradstreet’s inordinate focus on the past, as opposed to the future she will turn her attention to in the final section. It is interesting that she laments specifically the fact that “no candle e’er shall shine in thee” when fire was the agent of her home’s destruction (l. 33). This connection between her memory of activity inside the house and the agent of its burning may suggest that it is the very frivolity and inaction she describes having engaged in inside the house that made it necessary for God to destroy it. The juxtaposition of human-initiated and controlled candle burning with an ungovernable house fire, which can only be sent and managed by God, suggests that God has deliberately undercut Bradstreet’s sense of control. He has asserted his omnipotence, an idea that is consistent with Calvinist theology, which features a God “all-powerful and completely sovereign” (“People”).

Bradstreet here seems to see her home's immolation as a consequence of idleness. This interpretation explains why, in the second section, she speaks of God's burning of her house as fair. However, as the third section ends, the speaker has mostly abandoned the detachment and faith that she demonstrated in the second section of the poem, indicating the non-linearity of her spiritual path.

In the fourth and final section, Bradstreet rejects earthly attachments *once and for all* and turns her attention to the afterlife:

In silence ever shalt thou lie,  
 Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity.  
 Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,  
 And did thy wealth on earth abide?  
 Didst fix thy hope on mold'ring dust?  
 The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?  
 Raise up thy thoughts above the sky  
 That dunghill mists away may fly.  
 Thou hast a house on high erect,  
 Framed by that mighty Architect,  
 With glory richly furnished,  
 Stands permanent though this be fled.  
 It's purchased and paid for too  
 By Him who hath enough to do.  
 A price so vast as is unknown,  
 Yet by His gift is made thine own;  
 There's wealth enough, I need no more,  
 Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.  
 The world no longer let me love,  
 My hope and treasure lies above. (ll. 35-54)

This is the only section that does not have a clear setting, fitting Bradstreet's change of focus from the earthly to the immaterial. She turns again to the second person, but this time, rather than personifying her house, she upbraids herself for allowing her happiness to become dependent on

material things. Her relegation of the house to “silence” is deeply moving, as it draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the speaker has transcended her earlier “silent night,” the state of spiritual blindness she was in at the beginning of the poem. She writes, “straight I ‘gin my heart to chide,” the abbreviation of *begin* and attendant amplification of the hard *g* sound coupled with the lacerating *ch* sound of *chide* suggesting her abrupt—rather than gradual or linear—*cutting* off of her previous indulgence in sentimental mourning of earthly things.

With the words “A price so vast as is unknown,/Yet by His gift is made thine own” (ll. 49-50), Bradstreet expresses gratitude toward God for giving her a place in Heaven. She contrasts the endurance of God and her place in Heaven with the transitoriness and unimportance of her material and earthly surroundings, her “pelf.” And although it is tangential to my main argument, it is also interesting to note the contrast between God’s industry as suggested by the lines “It’s purchased and paid for too/By him who hath enough to do” with Bradstreet’s idleness as suggested by the third section (ll. 47-48). This negative view of idleness and positive view of work is characteristically Puritan (Feldmeth). Historian Paul Seaver writes of a “Puritan abhorrence of time wasted” (42). Bradstreet’s vision of godly industry thus further demonstrates her piety and spiritual health in this final section.

There is ample evidence that Bradstreet’s newfound detachment and piety will endure. First, this section is the last. There is no subsequent change in the narrator’s thoughts, giving the section and the sentiments expressed therein the last word. Second, the section is longer and the atti-

tudes expressed in it are more consistent than in any of the previous sections, suggesting the continuance of Bradstreet's current state. Whereas the first, second, and third sections were respectively twelve, eight, and fourteen lines, this final section is twenty lines; it is the first section with a number of lines evenly made up of tens, which has a stabilizing effect. The speaker has reached what Blanche de la Force, the neurotic nun who aspires to heroism in Francis Poulenc's opera *The Carmelites*—frequently translated as *Dialogues of the Carmelites*—refers to as “detachment [so long practiced that] one never feels one can ever turn back” (Poulenc 103).

Bidding farewell to her house and her former belongings, Bradstreet writes, “Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity” (l. 36). This is the first time in the poem that Bradstreet uses foreign words. Perhaps the newfound lingual breadth suggests the temporal breadth—the endurance—of the narrator's newfound state of detachment and spiritual integrity. The word “adieu” is especially appropriate here because, in French, it translates literally as “to God,” and Bradstreet here redirects her focus to God.

It is also in this section that we first see Bradstreet use meter to play with word pronunciation. Implying that she should be grateful that God, with all his responsibilities, has set aside a place for her in heaven, she reminds herself, “Thou hast a house on high erect,/Framed by that mighty Architect,/With glory richly furnished,/Stands permanent though this be fled./It's purchased and paid for too/By Him who hath enough to do” (ll. 43-48). To fit the poem's rhythm and to maintain its rhyme scheme, the *e* in the word “furnished” and the *e* in the word “purchased” must be pronounced. The elongation of words here suggests the endurance and

permanence of God and of Bradstreet's destined place in heaven as well as the endurance and permanence of Bradstreet's newfound piety. Thus she uses pronounciative as well as lingual breadth to suggest temporal breadth. This broadening of words also reflects the broadening of her scope of focus as she contemplates eternity and her own immortality. Further, Bradstreet's metaphorical references to God as an "Architect" and to her place in heaven as a "house" directly juxtapose the eternal divine with her burned earthly house, which she no longer mourns. Although her path to this state has not been linear, she has now reached a state of stable piety and spiritual enlightenment.

Bradstreet's placement of verbs emphasizes her action even when she works toward a state of submission to God's will. Throughout the poem, Bradstreet frequently places verbs at the ends of lines. Not all of these verbs refer to her own actions directly. However, when they do, their placement at the ends of lines magnifies her agency and activity. In the nostalgic, materialistic sections—sections one and three, lines 1-12 and 21-34—these line-ending verbs that refer to actions undertaken by Bradstreet directly occur several times: "took," "look," "spy," "cry," "past," "cast," "spy," and "lie" (ll. 1, 2, 7, 8, 21, 23, 24). However, in the "submissive" sections—sections two and four, lines 13-20 and 36-54—they also occur repeatedly: "look," "repine," "chide," "fly," and "love" (ll. 13, 18, 37, 42, 53). It seems that Bradstreet is also active when working toward detachment.

In the end, Bradstreet's pious attitude seems equivalent to a passive submission to God's will. But it is a process of *active* contemplation and self-castigation—set in motion by the burning of her house—that

leads Bradstreet to this state. Furthermore, the poem itself seems an active religious exercise as she upbraids herself for her earthly, material concerns and redirects her attention to the spiritual. To Bradstreet, reaching a state of detachment and piety is as much an active pursuit as the acquisition, use, and mourning of material things. Perhaps the fact that Bradstreet's path to piety requires conscious effort and redirection is one reason that it also meanders and bends rather than moves forward in a consistent, linear way. Overall, "Here Follows" suggests that a Puritan's path to piety does not move forward steadily; one falters on the way to achieving an ideal state of detachment. Still, Bradstreet's poem indicates that with reflection, persistence, and a willingness to critically examine one's thoughts and behavior, one can ultimately assume a pious mindset.

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