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Psychological Instability and Madness in Anne Bradstreet's Representative Poems: An Analysis

Anne Bradstreet'in Temsili Şiirlerinde Psikolojik İstikrarsızlık ve Delilik: Bir Analiz

Sinem Çapar İleri[1]

ABSTRACT
This study analyzes in detail the representative poems of the protofeminist American poet Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) and examines how these poems reflect Bradstreet's complex struggles as a woman poet, shaped by madness, instability, emotional fragility, and life, death, motherhood, faith, and artistry. In this context, it is significant to evaluate Bradstreet's works not only as aesthetic productions, but also as a field of expression that makes visible the poet's mental processes, emotional reactions, personal fears, and social position. The poet's texts confront the reader with internal conflicts, existential questionings, religious hesitations, and spiritual turmoil that affect both individual and cultural levels. Considering that women were severely restricted in the literary sphere in the seventeenth century, Anne Bradstreet's persistent embrace of the identity of "writer" against male-dominated authority and her struggle for self-expression are particularly striking. This article discusses the themes, images, and narrative strategies through which her unique poetic voice embodies this challenge; it analyses in detail the madness, doubt, self-awareness and creative search for identity seen in her texts.
Keywords: Poetry, Anne Bradstreet, American Lliterature, Madness, Mental States, Women's Writing

ÖZ
Bu çalışma, protofeminist Amerikalı şair Anne Bradstreet'in (1612–1672) temsili şiirlerini ayrıntılı biçimde analiz ederek, bu şiirlerin Bradstreet'in bir kadın şair olarak delilik, istikrarsızlık, duygusal kırılganlık ve yaşam, ölüm, annelik, inanç ile sanatçılık etrafında şekillenen karmaşık mücadelelerini nasıl yansıttığını incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda, Bradstreet'in eserlerinin yalnızca estetik bir üretim olarak değil, aynı zamanda şairin zihinsel süreçlerini, duygusal tepkilerini, kişisel korkularını ve toplumsal konumunu görünür kılan bir ifade alanı olarak değerlendirilmesi önem taşır. Şairin metinleri, okuyucuyu hem bireysel hem de kültürel düzeyde etkileyen içsel çatışmalar, varoluşsal sorgulamalar, dini tereddütler ve ruhsal sarsıntılarla yüzleştirir. On yedinci yüzyılda kadınların edebi alanda ciddi biçimde kısıtlandığı düşünüldüğünde, Anne Bradstreet'in erkek egemen otoriteye karşı "yazar" kimliğini ısrarla sahiplenmesi ve kendini ifade etme çabası özellikle dikkat çekicidir. Bu makale, onun özgün şiirsel sesinin bu meydan okumayı hangi temalar, imgeler ve anlatım stratejileri üzerinden somutlaştırdığını tartışmakta; metinlerinde görülen delilik, kuşku, öz-farkındalık ve yaratıcı kimlik arayışını ayrıntılı biçimde analiz etmektedir.
Anahtar kelimeler: Şiir, Anne Bradstreet, Amerikan Edebiyatı, Delilik, Zihinsel Durumlar, Kadın Edebiyatı

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INTRODUCTION

Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) emerges as a revolutionary voice in early American literature, whose writings anticipate the later development of feminist thought in the Western literary canon. She is a pioneer as a female poet, and her work of art continues to influence today's understanding of literature. She was born in England in 1612 to Thomas and Dorothy Yorke Dudley. Her father, Thomas Dudley, was a steward of the Earl of Lincoln. In 1628, at the tender age of sixteen, she married Simon Bradstreet, a Cambridge graduate. Anne and Simon Bradstreet shared a marriage with mutual love that lasted nearly forty-four years. Anne bore eight children; only one of her children died as an infant. In 1630, the Bradstreets emigrated to America with John Winthrop's company, which was the founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Anne Bradstreet's father was the second governor of the colony, and even Thomas Dudley and Anne Bradstreet's husband, Simon, became significant figures for the development of New England during that period of time. The Bradstreets initially settled at Newtown, which is now Cambridge; from then on, they moved from Ipswich to Andover. Eventually, Anne Bradstreet died in 1672, at the age of sixty (White, 1951, pp. 355-356).

This study seeks to explore how the themes of madness and psychological instability are articulated in Anne Bradstreet's representative poems. As an example of how Bradstreet created her work of art, which resulted in a portrayal of a woman's differing yet unstable mental states in her poetry, Timothy Sweet's article "Gender, Genre, and Subjectivity in Anne Bradstreet's Early Elegies" can be cited. In this article, Anne Bradstreet's protofeminist-revolutionary figure is also stated: "Bradstreet wants to write, but not from within the gender system that proscribes feminine subjectivity. In this sense she is trying to displace the category of writing subject, in moves that look much like those of classic deconstruction" (Sweet, 1988, p.158). Thus, the quotation reveals Bradstreet's desire to "own" the pen and assert her authorship; yet the constraints of the patriarchal order leave her feeling trapped, generating a continual sense of authorial anxiety throughout her writing life.

Anne Bradstreet's Poetry: A Precursor in Women's Writing

Initially, to explore the madness and diverse, unstable mental states in Anne Bradstreet's poetry, her significant poem "Prologue" serves as a suitable starting point. In these lines, Bradstreet explains her condition as a female poet:

> *Nor can I, like that fluent sweet-tongued Greek*
>
> *Who lisp'd at first, in future times speak plain.*
>
> *By Art he gladly found what he did seek,*
>
> *A full requital of his striving pain.*
>
> *Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure:*
>
> *A weak or wounded brain admits no cure.*
>
> (Bradstreet, 1897, lines 19-24)

She mentions the male Greek orator Demosthenes, who, despite his speech impediment, manages to speak eloquently and becomes an exemplar of rhetorical mastery. Bradstreet refers to him because, as a female poet, she likewise experiences the struggle of practicing her art within a male-dominated and patriarchal culture. As she continues, art can heal one's striving pain, but it is also a fact that a weak or wounded brain admits no cure. Thus, like Bradstreet, an artist like her inevitably faces traces of madness and pain as she struggles to live in a

patriarchal 17th-century society and to create an original work of art. Alice Henton, in her article on Bradstreet's "Prologue," notes Bradstreet's anxiety as a female poet: "With this poem, Bradstreet dramatically challenges the cultural devaluing of women she had 'endorsed' in 'The Prologue,' essentially negating that position or, at least, exposing the emptiness of its rhetoric" (Henton, 2012, p.308). Therefore, it can be asserted that one of the reasons for Bradstreet's anxiety is the cultural devaluing of women, which remains a continual struggle for her to practice her art.

As another example, Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book" can be mentioned. In this poem, Bradstreet has a conversation with her book and expresses her disappointment about her art's reception:

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,

Who after birth didst by my side remain,

Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,

Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,

Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,

Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).

At thy return my blushing was not small,

My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,

I cast thee by as one unfit for light,

Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;

Yet being mine own, at length affection would

Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:

I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,

And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.

(Bradstreet, 1897, lines 1-14)

In these lines, it is evident that Anne Bradstreet regards her work of art as a child, much like one of her eight children in real life. However, she also perceives flaws in this unruly piece of writing. Thus, it is her mind that sees the defects that did not actually exist. Like a mother in the postpartum period, her mental state borders on anxiety and instability, reflecting the emotional strain of her creative process: "Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain, Who after birth didst by my side remain" (lines 1-2).

As support of this idea, the article "Unfit for Light": Anne Bradstreet's Monstrous Birth" by Bethany Reid can be mentioned. Reid asserts that "The Author to her Book" can certainly be understood as playful, but when we view it within its historical context, we do not merely smile or laugh" (Reid, 1998, p. 541). Reid continues that "**w**e begin to understand the complexities women faced in claiming their own authority, their own voices, in a Puritan society whose workings were dominated by men" (p. 541). Similarly, a Puritan society dominated by men became a threat to a creative, rebellious, yet devout woman like Anne Bradstreet. She tried to fight against this patriarchal normativity. This struggle can be seen in her art, with traces of madness and unstable mental status evident in her poems like "The Author to Her Book" or "Prologue".

As Reid states, "Like Bradstreet, women fought for their legitimacy with the only tools at their disposal, the written and the spoken word" (Reid, 1998, p. 541-542). She uses the word both for her legitimacy, and it becomes a tool for her as an individual. Similarly, as contemporary writer and folklorist Maria Tatar states in her influential critical book *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*, "it quickly becomes evident that our understanding of heroism must be shaped by talk, plain and simple, as much as by legal or political action, by words as much as by deeds"(Tatar, 2021, p. 172). Thus, Tatar's words can be beneficial in supporting the idea that using words, whether through speaking or writing, can be a heroic act in a world where women are often silenced. In this context, Anne Bradstreet's struggle to become a writer results in both a sense of heroism and traces of psychological instability.

On the other hand, like a new mother in her postpartum era, Anne Bradstreet experienced an unsteady mental state after giving birth to her work of art. Because creating a work of art is in parallel with creating a new life in the world, both creations are painful yet joyful at the same time for the mother/poet. As in Timothy Sweet's article, which is entitled "Gender, Genre, and Subjectivity in Anne Bradstreet's Early Elegies," it suggests, "Suffering from the anxiety of authorship, a woman writer feels overwhelmed by and excluded from the essentially male tradition of authorship" (Sweet, 1988, p.152). Bradstreet suffers from the anxiety of authorship, as she becomes the precursor of women poets, like a mother to all women poets after her. This statement is supported by Gilbert and Gubar's canonical book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Bradstreet is the first woman to claim authority and creativity via her poetry; that is the reason she has no female precursor. They add that "pose of modesty [that] has its ill effects, both on the poet's self-definition and on her art" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, pp. 61-62). That is the reason, as a protofeminist and precursor of women poets, Anne Bradstreet's art is filled with her anxiety as an author, which also leads to tracing the unstable mental states, even madness, through her poetry.

Likewise, in Bradstreet's other poems, "The Four Ages" can serve as an example for this article. In the "Middle Age," it can be asserted that she reflects some of her mind's distressed condition in life as follows:

> *Great labors, sorrows, crosses, I sustained.*
>
> *The early cock did summon but in vain*
>
> *My wakeful thoughts up to my painful gain.*
>
> *My weary beast rest from his toil can find;*
>
> *But if I rest the more distressed my mind.*
>
> (Bradstreet, 1897, lines 50-54)

As she exemplifies the cycle of life, in middle age, she explains the painful gain of her wakeful thoughts, which distressed her mind. She realized that her mental state was once again unsteady, and we can trace the madness that made her distressed. For instance, in lines 50-54, she expresses the hardships she has faced throughout her life, including great labors, crosses, and sorrows that disturb her mind. Even resting cannot be an escape from her depressive thoughts. She also notes that this situation has persisted in her life since her youth, as she has already passed that stage. In the final part of "The Four Ages," "The Old Age," she again describes a depressive state, similar to Shakespeare's King Lear, whose loss of youth and power leads to his madness in the latter part of the canonical Shakespearean play. Anne Bradstreet's description of old age is similarly pessimistic:

My heart, sometime as fierce as lion bold,

Now trembling is, all fearful, sad, and cold.

My golden bowl and silver cord ere long

Shall both be broke by racking death so strong:

Then shall I go whence I shall come no more,

Sons, nephews, leave my farewell to deplore.

In pleasures and in labors I have found

That earth can give no consolation sound

To great, to rich, to poor, to young, to old,

To mean, to noble, to fearful, or to bold:

From king to beggar, all degrees shall find

But vanity, vexation of the mind.

(Bradstreet, 1897, lines 95-106)

Thus, as Bradstreet echoes the vexation of mind in an elderly person who also fears death's unknown state of being, she comes to the conclusion that everything in this life is temporary and in vain, whether one is rich, poor, young, or old. This part of the poem can be considered a summons to reflect on one's life as an old person and reevaluate it before life eventually ends. In lines 95-96, Bradstreet writes, "My heart, sometime as fierce as lion bold, Now trembling is, all fearful, sad, and cold". Here, she emphasizes the transformation of her heart from fierce and bold in youth to trembling and cold with old age. The poem's speaker mourns the loss of youthful strength and confronts the inevitable coming of death that old age brings. Bradstreet expresses not only sadness about leaving behind earthly delights and sorrows, but also recognizes the vanity of worldly life. Her mind shifts between memories of the past and anxiety about the unknowable future, which for her seems to mean inevitable death. These reflections reveal her depressive and fearful state as she contemplates the transience and vanity of life.

As another example of how the madness and unstable mental states are echoed in Anne Bradstreet's poetry, her other poem, entitled "As Weary Pilgrim," can be traced. Like in the previous poem, "The Old Age," she was reminiscing about the past and once again feels closer to her own death in this work:

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

With cares and fears ne'r cumbred be

Nor losses know, nor sorrows see

What tho my flesh shall there consume

it is the bed Christ did perfume

And when a few years shall be

this mortal shall be cloth'd upon

A Corrupt Carcasse down it lies

a glorious body it shall rise.

(Bradstreet, 1897, lines 22-32)

The title and lines 22-26—"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"—reveal the author's weariness. At the poem's beginning, her mental state is not entirely positive. She soon compares death to sleep and hopes that her faintings, sickness, uneasiness, and sorrow will be over after death, restating her unstable state. In the final lines, she expresses hope for dying as a devout Christian, even though she feels weary and uneasy. Thus, the poem illustrates Bradstreet's unstable mental state as a woman creator.

Finally, as a last example of Anne Bradstreet's echoing madness and the unstable state of the writer's mind, her poem "An Apology" needs to be mentioned. Her condition as a creator, writer, and a devoted Puritan results in a chaotic situation in which she always has doubts about her role in life, both as a believer and a mortal, ordinary human being:

Essays I many made but still gave out,

The more I mus'd, the more I was in doubt:

The subject large my mind and body weak,

With many moe discouragements did speak.

All thoughts of further progress laid aside,

Though oft perswaded, I as oft deny'd,

At length resolv'd, when many years had past,

To prosecute my story to the last;

And for the same, I hours not few did spend,

And weary lines (though lanke) I many pen'd:

But 'fore I could accomplish my desire,

My papers fell a prey to th'raging fire.

And thus my pains (with better things) I lost,

Which none had cause to wail, nor I to boast.

No more I'le do sith I have suffer'd wrack,

Although my Monarchies their legs do lack:

Nor matter is't this last, the world now sees,

Hath many Ages been upon his knees.

(Bradstreet, 1897, lines 3-20)

In detail, lines 4-6 reveal the voice in the poem reflecting her inner doubts and conflicts about life, a theme echoed in many of Bradstreet's other poems, as the poem itself states, "The more I mus'd, the more I was in doubt". Thus, the more she thinks, the more she finds herself in doubt, which causes her to feel both bodily and mentally weaker:"The subject large my mind and body weak". This questioning mode once again results in the mind's unstable wandering, which can lead to traces of madness. Even, it is mentioned that the writer cannot fulfill her own desires and still feels a void and emptiness inside her, that everything is in vain. As she reflects on these wanderings through the lines between 13 and 15, she still thinks about what she could have written but how she cannot in reality: "But 'fore I could accomplish my desire, My papers fell a prey to th'raging fire. And thus my pains (with better things) I lost". In line 12, "And weary lines (though lanke) I many pen'd", she also reflects that even though her lines are "weary", she still continues her writing processes. In lines 15-16, she once again explains the futility in life, that, whether she has negative or positive thoughts towards life itself, everything will be the same: "And thus my pains (with better things) I lost, Which none had cause to wail, nor I to boast". Moreover, even she felt the pain of the long-lost things; everything had passed now, and that was the reason the pessimistic tone could be felt throughout the poem once again.

Ethical Statement

This study does not involve human or animal participants, and therefore does not require approval from an ethics committee. All data used in this analysis were gathered from existing literary texts and secondary sources.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, in these lines and in the other analyzed poems in the article, Anne Bradstreet expresses her inner conflicts as an artist who suffers while creating and then continues to doubt herself. She becomes once again close to madness as a woman writer. As Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert explain in their canonical book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, the pen is used to oppress women by the male writers, and it becomes a tool for dominating the woman" (Çapar, 2017, p. 51). Thus, it can be said that Bradstreet similarly demands the author's authority as a protofeminist woman writer. Furthermore, Bradstreet echoes Virginia Woolf's canonical book *A Room of One's Own*, as Woolf says, "Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics" (Woolf, 2014, p, 64). Hence, Bradstreet, as a protofeminist writer, tried to permeate the walls of patriarchy with her creative force and became a pioneer in the Western literary canon, even if it causes her to echo some unsteady traces of madness and depression throughout her poems.

Additionally, as it is asserted in the article entitled "Anne Bradstreet's Poetic Voices" by Kenneth A. Requa, "Our present age appears to be offering ever-expanding opportunities for the professional woman, but the environment in which Anne Bradstreet lived would cause the woman who sought fame beyond the saintly performance of household duties to become anxiously introspective" (Requa, 1974, p. 17). That is the reason Bradstreet ironically even "warns herself that 'men can do best, and women know it well" (p. I02) (17). In parallel with Requa's statement, Ivy Schweitzer's article "Anne Bradstreet Wrestles with the Renaissance" also admits that Bradstreet is a forerunner and a precursor of other women writers: "As a forerunner of other women struggling to enter (and therefore subvert) the male-dominated

tradition, she fought several crucial rounds, independent, intellectual figure in the field of poetry" (Schweitzer, 1988, p. 307). These two quotations from different critics also exemplify what this article tried to do by analyzing various examples of poetry. The line, "Men can do best, and women know it well," can be considered a latent plea of Anne Bradstreet from her significant poem "Prologue", about the inequalities in the gender system; thus, it might also be said that if she were born in the twenty-first century, nowadays, she could be a free, independent, intellectual figure in the field of poetry.

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