

Restriction, Resistance, and Humility: A Feminist Approach to Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley’s Literary Works

Rowshan Jahan Chowdhury¹

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Premier University, Chittagong

Abstract

Anglo-American and French feminists focus on women’s equality, women’s experience as writers, and feminine writing. Proponents of black feminism, by contrast, position black women in fundamentally different ways from white women and offer the concept of intersectionality which calls for including women of all races in feminist concerns. Adopting this feminist approach, my paper uses a retrospective analytical methodology and aims at establishing a connection between two women poets of early America: Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. Anne Bradstreet writes about her experience of being a wife and mother, and overall makes statements about the patriarchal confinement imposed on women in her society in *The Tenth Muse* (1650). She had to succumb to the patriarchal Puritan society by writing poems secretly. Yet, she defies the “carping tongues” with her “mean pen.” Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved poet, published *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) where she, like Bradstreet, wrote with a devotional homage to Christianity, but her poems also criticize those who “view [her] sable race with scornful eye.” Though superior to most whites in her intellectual and literary accomplishments, Wheatley is clearly never their social equal and remains enslaved. Wheatley and Bradstreet, being brought to a new world from their land of origin, encounter a complex “phallogocentric” world. They oscillate between the two places and struggle to survive amidst the tripartite challenge of womanhood, motherhood, and patriarchal gender norms. The recent feminist discussions in academia mostly ignore how these two female poets fight intellectual battles and resist the patriarchal tradition, breaking the imposed silence and thus, gaining agency. Using feminist and gender theory, I examine their experiences as women and present a comparative analysis of the approaches that Bradstreet, as a white woman of the Puritan society, and Wheatley, as a black woman of the age of enlightenment, employ to assert their existence through writing.

Keywords: Phallogocentric Discourse, Race, Resistance, Politics of Sustained Empowerment

Male voices, starting from the ancient Greeks, have determined the role of women in society asserting that they “are physically, intellectually, and artistically superior” to the woman (Bressler 147). In response to this androcentric culture, recent scholars like Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster focus their concern on women’s bodies and their creativity to show how “masculinist values” obfuscated, infiltrated, and influenced our attitude to women’s writing and their creativity. Theorists such as Judith Butler, Vicki Kirby, Barbara Brook, and Jane Gallop also examine how the lives of women shape their creativity. In the 1970s, French psychoanalytic feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva became more concerned with women’s writing. Instead of celebrating women as writers, they asked how women can write against the dominant language which is “phallogocentric” or masculine. Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray define women’s writing as a form of *jouissance* (a term coined by Irigaray) which is feminine, maternal, and sexual. While all these feminist discussions encompass women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only, this essay examines two of the earliest female poets Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) and Phillis

¹ Currently a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA

Wheatley (1753- 1784) whose writings created the literary path for women even before the concept “feminism” came into being.

Regarding the early women writers' resistance writing, Nina Baym, in her 2011 book, *Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927*, uncovers and describes the writing in different genres of almost 350 American women, most of them unknown today but many of them successful and influential in their own time. Baym says, “[w]ithout the feminist literary criticism of the late 1970s and early 1980s, hundreds of women writers of the past would still be unknown and the academy would have remained a much more hostile place for women literary scholars” (qtd. in Malecka 4). A critic of American feminism, Camille Paglia declares that creativity is itself male and whatever women create, it is more masculine than feminine. Another scholar Pattie Cowell finds it significant that women writers are now allowed to make some noise. In a similar thread, Karen M. Odden states that “it is only by failing in the maternal role that these women gain creative agency” (Schuster xxiii). In contrast to this notion, my paper shows how Bradstreet and Wheatley react to the conventional restriction on women through their creative genius in a non-violent way and win over the barriers of womanhood, motherhood, and phallogocentric discourse through their tropes of humility and modesty.

Anne Bradstreet is the first Puritan woman to be recognized as an accomplished New England poet. Bradstreet immigrated to the new world with her husband and parents in 1630, and between 1633 and 1652 she had eight children. Bradstreet went through mental turbulence as her “heart rose” in protest against the “new world and new manners” (Bradstreet's words found on a plaque at the Bradstreet Gate in Harvard Yard). Her recurrent illness and domestic responsibilities made it difficult for her to write poetry. Yet, her volume of poetry *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), was published posthumously and received considerable attention. In spite of Puritan restrictions set on women's creative experiments such as writing poems or fiction or creating artwork, Bradstreet remained concerned with the issues of sin and redemption, physical and emotional frailty, death and immortality, and struggles to resolve the conflict she had been experiencing between the pleasures of sensory and familial experience, and the promises of heaven. As a Puritan, she was bound to subdue her attachment to the world, but as a woman, she sometimes felt more strongly connected to her husband, children, and community than to God. Her poems are full of “normative oppositions” as she is a “colonial woman who would have experienced herself as the ‘other’ in relation to so many forms of authority” (Myles 353).

Scholars such as Katarzyna Malecka, Adrienne Rich, and Timothy Sweet examine Bradstreet's poetry using Lacan and Kristeva's perspectives. Malecka shows how Bradstreet goes beyond the Puritan norms with her use of rhetorical devices and strategies that expose her preference for the material world to the spiritual world. Timothy Sweet maintains that Bradstreet's earlier elegies interrogate gender hierarchy but her accession to a personal voice makes her feminist tone end in failure because of her “surrender or retreat into hostile terrain” (170). Referring to Susan Wiseman, Susan Bruce states that Bradstreet's “exclusion from the political arena produces a ‘figurative, oblique, complex politics’ rather than no politics at all” (21). Whereas many scholars following Adrienne Rich centered their discussion on Bradstreet's poems as either public or personal, I would like to highlight how her private experience of being a woman and a mother enabled her to prove herself as a versatile artist and stand superior to her male contemporaries.

Puritan society relegated household work to the female domain, but Bradstreet gets inspiration from that domain and certainly establishes her creativity without writing “of wars, of captains, and of kings” (“The Prologue”). Though not in the accurate sense of *jouissance*, she utilizes her feminine desire and motherly sense as materials for her poems. Bradstreet uses “feminine *content* and feminine strategies in *The Tenth Muse*” (Henton 303). One of her most anthologized pieces, “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” expresses the intense devotion that the couple shared: “If ever two were one, then surely we./ If ever man were lov’d by wife, then thee” (1-2). Another poem entitled “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” depicts the emotions that many colonial Puritan women experienced before childbirth, as the threat of death was always present. Similarly, her letter “To My Dear Children,” her “Meditations,” and, most significantly, her poem “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1656,” exemplify how she seeks to preserve her maternal legacy through her “eight birds”: “Thus gone, amongst you I may live,/And dead, yet speak, and counsel give” (93-94). Thus, Bradstreet uses her motherhood as an intellectual enterprise “by embracing the socially-sanctioned role of the selfless and pious Christian mother . . . in order to secure a desirable posthumous reputation” (Pietros 60). Besides being a good mother and good wife as expected by the Puritan community, she also dares to exercise her literary talent in an antagonistic environment by employing the tool of humbleness.

Bradstreet’s humbleness works as a severe ironical trope in the poem “The Prologue,” where she asks for the domestic herbs “Thyme or Parsley wreath,” instead of the traditional laurel. To show her resistance, she credits the poets and historians as superior in intellect for whom her pen is “mean” and her lines are “obscure.” Her poems needle the carping tongues and expose that her modesty is stronger than her aggressiveness. She does not write as a servile one, but rather proves herself a spirited woman with a strong sense of reality and experience which is apparent in “The Prologue”: “If what I do prove well, it won’t advance./ They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance” (31-32). Though Sweet thinks that Bradstreet’s “defective” image fails to establish her female voice, Bradstreet employs her modesty as her poetic strength and declares that she neither has “skill” to write like male poets nor are her “ragged lines” worthy of recognition. Thereby, appearing to subordinate herself to male writers and critics, she says in “The Prologue”: “Men can do best, and women know it well./ Preeminence in all and each is yours;/ Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours” (40-42). The same resistant tone is found in her elegy on Sir Philip Sidney which indicates that Bradstreet was angered by the gender bias against women writers: “Fain would I show how he fame’s paths did tread,/ But now into such lab’rinths I am lead,/ With endless turns, the way I find not out” (70-72). In the poem “In Honor of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory,” Bradstreet praises Queen Elizabeth’s outstanding leadership and historical prominence. In contrast to her submissive tone in “The Prologue,” her portrait of Elizabeth does not attempt to conceal her confidence in the abilities of women: “She hath wiped off th’ aspersion of her Sex,/ That women wisdom lack to play the rex” (34-35). She addresses all men who commit a crime by denying women’s capacity for reasoning: “Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long,/ But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong” (102-103) and lauds Elizabeth who outdoes the male leaders by excelling in the so-called masculine role. While Sweet’s assertion apparently seems true that Bradstreet subordinates herself to the phallogocentric structure, it is essential to explore the inner paradox and strength that Bradstreet’s subordinate tone has. By denying her capabilities, she, in fact, strongly affirms their presence.

Where Bradstreet was subdued by the Puritan male-dominated society in spite of being a white woman, it is easy to deduce what the fate of black women of the same era could be. In the 1980s, advocates of black feminism such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker argue that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways from white women. However, living with the dual burdens of racism and sexism, slave women in the plantation South assumed roles within the family and community that contrasted sharply with traditional female roles in the larger American society. Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) remains an indispensable starting point for the study of women and slavery. The book explores new ways of understanding the intersection of race and gender, comparing the myths that stereotyped female slaves with the realities of their lives. Above all, this groundbreaking study shows us how black women experienced freedom in the Reconstruction South — their heroic struggle to gain their rights, hold their families together, resist economic and sexual oppression, and maintain their sense of womanhood against all odds. In 2015, the publication of *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* contributed hugely to reviving the black women thinkers of America. This book challenges the resistance to the intellectual contribution of black women, retrieves their ideas, and foregrounds “how these ideas grew out of unique challenges to both the mind and the body” (Bay *et al.* 4). Thus, the earliest African American poet Phillis Wheatley again draws the attention of the critics.

Phillis Wheatley, a seven-year-old girl of small size, missing front teeth, from Senegal, became a commodity on the eighteenth-century global market. Being kidnapped from her African land and sold to a Boston merchant John Wheatley in 1761, she was renamed as Phillis by her owner after the slave ship, the *Phillis*, which brought her to America. By being renamed as Phillis Wheatley, she was stripped of her African identity and then occupied by the Wheatley family as their property. The Wheatley family, however, provided her with an education that was unusual for any woman of the time and unprecedented for any female slave. Her extraordinary accomplishments in reading and writing brought her political, social, and religious recognition. The religious knowledge she received from Susanna Wheatley, who was committed to evangelical Christianity, provided her with the themes and motives for writing. She traveled to England to manage a publisher for her book of poems and created a significant image there as a black poet. This enslaved girl became the founding mother of African American Literature by publishing her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773. In *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011), Vincent Carretta writes that Phillis Wheatley is “one of fewer than twenty whose words found their way directly into print during their lifetimes” (4). Arlette Frund affirms that Wheatley deserves to be called “intellectual” according to the definition of the term which describes the intellectual as “an individual who engages in an activity of the mind, produces written work, and participates in public debates” (35). According to Mukhtar Ali Isani, Wheatley had undoubtedly become a celebrity, and newspapers and magazines, both British and American, had contributed to the bulk of her fame. Forty-two newspapers and magazines, twenty-seven of which were American, took notice of the poet on more than one occasion. These notices focused on Wheatley as a black poet who proved herself as an intellectual in spite of being an enslaved woman.

In that era of enlightenment, many intellectuals and critics questioned Phillis Wheatley's creativity. For instance, Thomas Jefferson cast doubt on Wheatley's authorship, arguing in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1786) that "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (234). Jefferson believed that the suffering of slaves should have given them a comparative advantage as poets, but he found Wheatley to be lacking in "imagination." Led by Jefferson, the whites "ridiculed Wheatley's appropriation of the classical tradition, which they mocked as beyond her race's abilities" (Taylor 603). Though critics admonish her for being "too white" in expressing her gratitude to the white society, Phillis' voice against the slave owners is apparent in "To The Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth": "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat ... Such, such my case. And can I then but pray/ Others may never feel tyrannic sway?" (24-25, 30-31).

Being a slave and a woman, the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley had to work through complexities produced by the intersection of race and gender. The cruelty of her owners is highlighted by M. A. Richmond: "she inhabited a strange, ambiguous twilight zone between black society and white society, cut off from any normal human contact" (20-21). In a letter written to Reverend Samson Occum in 1774, Wheatley hints at her frustration at the colonists' hypocritical nature as they embraced the rhetoric of liberty and freedom while enslaving others. Addressing this hypocrisy as "a strange Absurdity," she writes, "in every Human breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom ... How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others ..." (Carretta, *Complete Writings*, 153). Many readers ignore the ironic tone she uses in her allegorical poem "On Virtue" where she writes: "Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach./ I cease to wonder, and no more attempt/ Thine height t'explore, or fathom thy profound" (3-5). Wheatley's modesty in acknowledging her own inferiority and appeal to "Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,/ O Thou, enthroned with Cherubs in the realms of day!" (20-21) hint at not only her own helplessness in a white patriarchal literary world but also the miserable condition of the whole black race. Her attempt to exercise power over social, religious, and political events suffers criticism as she takes a role that is traditionally reserved for male authority.

Though Wheatley had been converted to Christianity, she did not remain submissive as a "stranger in a strange land." Rather, she claimed an identity as an Ethiopian that granted her biblical authority to speak to her white readers. In "Deism," she writes: "Must Ethiopians be employ'd for you?/ Much I rejoice if any good I do" (1-2). Her audacity "assumes a voice that transcends the 'privileges' of those who are reputedly her superiors in age, status, abilities, race, and gender" (Carretta 59). By celebrating her blackness, she reminds her audience in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" that difference in color cannot be a barrier to the common ground of unity:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
Their colour is a diabolic die.
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (5-8)

Wheatley preaches a kind of humanism that is based on the shared similarity of all created beings and envisions a time when all human beings regardless of skin color would come to the same platform through their refined soul. She subverts the conventional opposition between blackness and whiteness by using the imperative “Remember” and by arguing that “complexion was morally inconsequential” (Carretta 63). Staying among the whites, she breaks down the notion of race, creates a transatlantic network, and becomes the originator of a new black history. Eric Thomas Slauter addresses the white ambivalence and anxiety saying that “Colonial whites worried when blacks failed to reproduce white culture, and they worried when blacks did reproduce it” (96). Slaves were required “to be exactly like whites while remaining absolutely unlike them” (Thorn 79). Donald L. Robinson insists that “Few white men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could accept, or even imagine, the only realistic alternative” to slavery: “a racially integrated society” (Forbes 82). Waldstreicher’s evocative essay “The Wheatleyan Moment” reminds us of the egalitarian challenge posed by Wheatley. He notes that it is both a conceptual and methodological problem in recent black studies that fail to see the revolutionary challenge posed by enslaved writers when they came to appear in print with the aim of shifting from the marginal to the center.

Bradstreet and Wheatley both participated in the long tradition of humility to survive in the world which valued humility as a virtue for women. Robert Daly questions “why humility was so vital and viable a convention for so long and in so many otherwise quite various writers” of that era (3). Though Eileen Margerum affirms this humility as conventional, there is a kind of “performative force” in their writings. Susan Truce thinks that “For a woman, the act of publishing was itself a gendered act, an intrusion into a male sphere” (21). These two poets write not as revolutionary, but rather as very submissive women with moral sensibilities. If we call it the conventional trait of the woman of that time, a very truth remains hidden – the phallogocentric social structure. These two female poets are not allowed to enter into the print world directly. The patriarchal society has to be satisfied with the note of authenticity and the moral testimonial from trustworthy people. Bradstreet’s brother-in-law John Woodbridge’s epistle for her book *The Tenth Muse* reflects how Bradstreet has to be proved virtuous for being read by the public:

It is the work of a woman, honoured, and esteemed where she lives, for her demeanour, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete managing of her family occasions, and more than so, these poems are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments. (Hensley 3)

The title page of *The Tenth Muse* states that these poems are written “by a Gentlewoman of those Parts” so that Bradstreet does not seem “unwomanly.” To “protect a woman’s reputation from charges of immodestly pursuing publication” and to assure the public that she is neither influenced by evil nor does she neglect her motherly or womanly duties, Woodbridge designs the prefatory letter (Henton 305). He informs the readers that these poems are being published without the author’s knowledge who did not expect it to “see the sun.” Patricia Pender argues against the humility tropes attached to her poems, saying that this strategic deployment of modesty manipulates the convention and “constitutes a form of subtle self-fashioning” (Pietros 51). However, this epistle

also reflects the literary battle of the sexes when Woodbridge urges the readers not to be offended lest “men turn more peevish than women, to envy the excellency of the inferior sex” ((Hensley 3).

Wheatley also suffered the hostility of white colonists under the guise of hospitality in Boston society. Her host family publicized their status, piety, and charity by displaying Phillis among white Bostonians. She was shown off as an anomaly among Africans and as an entertainment for her exotic curiosity. She was first “examined” by boards of male experts to judge whether she was capable of writing and then her first book *Poems* was published in London with a documented preface signed by eighteen Boston worthies certifying the authenticity of her poems:

WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them. (Gates 31)

Both Bradstreet and Wheatley adopted a self-deprecating voice, pretending to be “defective,” “mean,” or “fool.” These are the typical “compulsory performance” codes set by the masculine authority, according to Judith Butler, who asserts that masculine or feminine gender performances are culturally defined attributes, and not tied to physical bodies. Butler criticizes the traditional gender system that “establishes not only the sex of bodies but also the kinds of desire they can have” (Tyson 110). But this twentieth-century concept was beyond the imagination of early New England people where there were only Pilgrim Fathers, not Pilgrim Mothers, and where assertive and aggressive women were a threat to male domination or the patriarchal structure. In the case of Phillis Wheatley, slavery was another addition to her already jeopardized life, but she became eminent despite these gender constraints and other barriers imposed on her race. Like Anne Bradstreet, she became the tenth muse for black folks in the history of African literature. Bradstreet and Wheatley both demonstrate mastery of physiology, classics, history, politics, anatomy, geography, astronomy, Greek metaphysics, and the concepts of cosmology, unusual subjects for women at that time. Both poets’ acceptance of subordinate roles despite their evident talent proves their strong reaction to the debate about women’s access to reason. This is the same attitude that should place these poets in the category of Christine de Pisan, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Simone de Beauvoir who fought for women’s intellectual recognition.

Though the eighteenth-century books rarely included a frontispiece portrait of the author, Wheatley’s book was published with a frontispiece portrait that identifies her as “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley.” She became “the first colonial American woman of any race to have her portrait printed alongside her writings” (Carretta 100). In the portrait, Wheatley is dressed up as a domestic servant looking upward for spiritual inspiration and lacking the courage to look directly at the viewers (see fig. 1). She is made to exhibit her inferior status to compensate for her revolutionary act of writing as an African. Though Bradstreet’s book was not published with her portrait, most of the images of Bradstreet found later present the poet with the same humble and meek look (see fig. 2). These images lack poetic confidence, rather highlighting their feminine docility. This demonstrates how these two poets were barred from exhibiting their inherent talent and poetic worth. Yet, these images with their humble looks worked in their favor, making their entry into the print world possible.



Fig. 1: Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)



Fig. 2: Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

Bradstreet and Wheatley's poems echo the "feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and dread" as a reaction to their [her] separation from her family and arrival in America (Frund 41). Both of these poets find New England a wilderness but embrace it and endow it with their personal faculties and intellectual authority. Though Wheatley was a black slave poet, her network was more expanded than Bradstreet and even the themes of her poems range from personal to religious and social to political issues. Clad in slave's clothes, the young girl Phillis Wheatley takes pen in hand and visualizes something that remains invisible to her critics. In her poem "To Maecenas," Wheatley refers to her male precursor Terence and raises a question to the Muses for their "partial grace." She privileges Terence's name and also protests against the exclusion of women from the favor. Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls this tendency in the intellectual trajectory of African American writings the "cultural negotiation" (422). John C. Shields investigates the hymns of Wheatley in his book *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* and shows that "her use of the classical form expresses 'her portrayal of the feminine principle'" and her hymns are powerful expressions of woman in nature, woman in art, woman in society, and woman in politics (qtd. in Anderson 3-4). African American scholar Maureen Anderson affirms that Wheatley takes the voice of Dido in "An Hymn to Humanity" and "employs the epic hymn form, therefore, to celebrate and champion the feminine within a subversive, though powerful, expression of poetry" (4). Wheatley becomes the figure of feminine strength and wisdom, and raises the status of those who are disadvantaged, betrayed, and suppressed. As a slave, she cannot show her subversive attitude to her audience, so she takes the guise of Dido and a Christian message to deliver her charge against humanity.

Using their womanhood and motherhood as a source of strength, both Bradstreet and Wheatley participated in the debates of their time. Being a mother of eight and writing poems at the same time, Bradstreet maintained both Puritan family legacy and poetic legacy. She offers a different example of female physicality by "using reproductive discourse as a metaphor for power and constructing a female body that could legitimately produce not only children but ideas as well" (Lutes 310). Wheatley goes through a different experience regarding her marriage and motherhood. After the death of her master, Wheatley gained freedom from slavery and got married to a free black man of Boston. But her emancipation proved fatal for her as it made it impossible for her to have any financial help from her owner and she became more enslaved in freedom. The three

children she had all died young and later she died in poverty with her youngest child, unknown and unmarked. Her biographer Vincent Carretta notes, “Much about Phillis Wheatley’s life between 1776 and her death in 1784 remains a mystery” (172). Yet her enslavement, blackness, and womanhood fail to stop her literary glory from flourishing, creating a significant path for other women writers of color.

Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley, as poets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, could not have known about writing “feminine.” Moreover, the notion of “feminine writing” advocated by Hélène Cixous was unknown to these women intellectuals. While Cixous asks for a kind of writing which is all about women’s true sexuality, their eroticization, their adventures, their awakenings and their discoveries of a dynamic zone, we find a different version of writing in the works of Bradstreet and Wheatley. They write neither as rebels nor as conformists. They exploit masculine language to unfold the innate creative strength of the woman and deconstruct woman’s function within the discourse of man. Like the “madwoman in the attic,” they pose the challenge to patriarchy in action and in writing, as later envisioned by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Through their literary and biological children, they perpetuate their legacy. Motherhood or slavery, neither could restrain them from asserting their womanhood. Using humbleness, apologies, lamentation, and helplessness as the key to freedom, both poets make a careful negotiation with the norms without following the orthodox path and create a strong place among the literary intellectuals. They remain out of mainstream politics but engage themselves in a more complicated one: the politics of sustained empowerment, which their male contemporaries could not even imagine. Both of them overcome the boundaries and restrictions set upon them by the male-dominated society and situate themselves in the field of gendered hierarchy in New England, posing a constant threat to the conservative notions of social order and typical gender norms.

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