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Female Order: Personal Awareness and Willful Discontent

“Who says my hand a needle better fits…If what I do prove well, it won’t advance, / They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance” (Bradstreet 98).

In Anne Bradstreet’s Poem, “The Prologue”, the poetic voice questions and challenges women’s roles in the Great Chain of Being, demonstrating a heightened sense of personal awareness through her assertion that the passage of hierarchy cannot be broken by sheer talent and usefulness alone, for the patriarchal dominance is inherently decided by the laws of the universe.

On the surface level, Bradstreet’s first line is written in passive rather than active voice. The poetic voice contends that it is the needle that fits her hand best, rather than her hand conforming to hold the needle itself. It can be then inferred that the poetic voice does not actively pursue her ascribed gender roles, rather, they are thrust upon her by the ambiguous critics the voice calls out to. Further, because it is the needle that is active in the line, this asserts that the roles and duties of women garner more strength and importance than women themselves. Women, by extension, amass no reverence unless they act out their accredited roles. “The Prologue” continuously points out how men hold inferior suppositions regarding women, particularly concerning their inability to discuss arduous topics such as wars and kings, as noted in the first stanza of the poem. These lines suggests submit the impression that women are more apt in performing smaller, simpler tasks such as sewing.

The “who” in this line refers to the vague critics the poetic voice regularly sources. She postulate to know what their reactions and commentary will be once her works are published, demonstrating a profound sense of personal alertness, especially in terms of the Great Chain of Being. She realizes her position in the living hierarchy is beneath men, and quite literally cites men as the critics who will inevitably besmirch her work and literary endowment.

Further, the phrase “what I do” refers to her creation, her craft, her art. In the Great Chain of Being, those in the higher ranks are those who are capable of creation. God, the greatest conceivable supreme being, is credited with the conception of the universe. Men, not much farther down on the chain, are credited for the creation of art, literature, technology, and much else. These are notably grand creations which alter the course of history. Women, by contrast, are intended to only procreate rather than craft art and beauty. Later on in the poem, Bradstreet facetiously insists that this is because “Men can do best, and women know it well”. She quite literally professes her intimate awareness of her gender’s putative mediocrity. Therefore, by challenging her ascribed purpose on Earth, the poetic voice risks her seat in the Great Chain of Being, especially since literature becomes a member of the public domain once released from the author. The author loses his/her ability to expostulate once it becomes a matter of personal record. Further, those who read it may be influenced in ways that challenge women’s assigned roles.

However, the voice immediately discredits her work’s value and influence in the phrase “it won’t advance”. Women as a whole, regardless of their creative exports, are so engrained in the Great Chain of Being that the order cannot be broken through one act of defiance alone. Further, even if the poetic voice wished to reposition the order or potentially break the chain, she would inevitably risk eventual turmoil. Regardless, her work would not be respected, or will not “advance” because it does not originate from a respectable source, i.e. a man. Interestingly enough, if one were to examine divine or spiritual order in the Great Chain of Being, one creature whose adroitness is not respected is the devil himself. If this be the case, critics would judge her even more so because her proficiency cannot be an extension of womanhood’s talent, but the devil’s influence. This is a clear example of the primordial cosmic conflict between good and evil, or God versus Satan, or more subtly, men versus women.

The poetic voice furthers her comments about the critics by referring to them as “they” repeatedly. In a mere few lines, she references the critics twice. This contends her awareness of the male gaze, the notion that everything women do is under the constant super valence of male eyes and male judgement. She is not only aware of her place in the order of the universe, but the fact that her status is closely being watched by men, regardless of what she does. Her tone transgresses into a rather bitter inflection when she discusses how the critics will assert that her art is stolen or accidental even if it does “prove well”, or prove to be of notable merit. Due to her inferior status and position in the Great Chain, her pieces will plummet due to their origin: a woman.

On the topic of thievery, the poetic voice argues that her work will be regarded as “stol’n”. In the scope of gender order, it can be inferred that her her work would be presumed to be stolen from a man in particular. Despite the author’s comprehensive education, her status as a women prevents her from achieving creative commendation. This notion, however, is entirely contradictory to men throughout history. One such example is Christopher Columbus, who set sail on expeditions that exploited lands and its inhabitants for the sake of power and arguably, a primitive form of manifest destiny. This presents a conundrum, for if a man overtakes and manipulates another’s land, he is deemed a hero. Appositionally, if a woman’s craft is even surmised to be counterfeited, she is immediately dismissed.

The final potential critical assessment of her work indicates that if such greatness originated from a woman, surely it was “by chance” that the inferior gender produced it. The notion of fate, fortune, and ultimately divinity as the greatest compasses for human action is at work. Philosophically speaking, the concept of predetermination and the works of fate led individuals to believe that their conduct and performance were simply the result of some third party, a supreme force guiding their futures. This notion favored men and patriarchy, and utterly dismissed women’s works to nothing but “chance”. Divinity and fate was utilized to justify male expeditions in particular (again, an early manifest destiny theme). Divinity, therefore, paints men as leaders and women as followers of their greatness. This ‘tag-along’ imagery yet again correlates to the Great Chain of Being, wherein women were quite literally placed beneath men, but were intended to follow their actions. Those beneath a particular being in the Great Chain are not only granted inferiority, but compelled to pursue the management and supreme intelligence of those above them, particularly God.

What remains rather ambiguous is the source of the author’s “chance”, or her fate and fortune. This presents an intriguing question: are her critics impeaching her craft because her influence or inspiration is not purely divine, but Satanic in nature? Considering the concept of God-driven fate, men morally should not be able to critique her work because it would be a challenge to God’s plan for the author. Therefore, if it is a sadistic entity governing Bradstreet’s aptitude, rebuking her chef-d’oeuvre would follow suit.

Ultimately, this pokes holes into the Great Chain. “By chance” could also refer to a type of pure, sourceless accident rather than predetermined destiny. If this is the case, this would suggest the poetic voice is unknowingly, and potentially unwillingly breaking out of her ascribed gender roles, and at a larger scale, challenging the order in the Great Chain. By doing so, the poetic voice would ultimately subject herself to not simply criticism, but divine chaos. Such horrors do not arise from accidents, at least not in deliberate, conscious, crafted literature. Therefore, it follows that the author is prudently attempting to denouncing her roles and gain respect for her talents and literary exports.

This deliberate effort comes in fruition with a combination of phrases, particularly “what I do”, and “it”, referring to her art, craft, and talent alone. When the author mentions herself, “I”, she attributes dismissal and critique. However, it is not her own face she wishes to save. Rather, she insists that she merely asks for respect for what she creates. Because of her awareness of female inferiority within the Great Chain, she understands her person will not be able to assemble the same amount of respect and prestige as man-made work may. Literature, though classically derived from men, does not have a spot in the Great Chain. In the final lines of the piece, Bradstreet argues that literature can, and should be judged individually on the basis of its own worth, not its source. She contends she is comfortable in her inferior position, she will remain in second place on the condition that her work is judged on its own merit, its own illustriousness.