

Anne Bradstreet

(1612-1672)

A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment (1678)

My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life--nay more,
My joy, my magazine of earthly store:
If two be one, as surely thou and I,
How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?
So many steps head from the heart to sever,
If but a neck, soon should we be together.
I like the earth this season mourn in black;
My sun is gone so far in's Zodiac,
Whom whilst I 'joyed, nor storms nor frosts I felt,
His warmth such frigid colds did cause to melt.
My chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn:
Return, return, sweet sol, from Capricorn.
In this dead time, alas, what can I more
Than view those fruits which through thy heat I bore?
Which sweet contentment yields me for a space
True living pictures of their father's face.
O strange effect! Now thou art southward gone,
I weary grow, the tedious day so long:
But when thou northward to me shalt return,
I wish my sun may never set, but burn
Within the Cancer of my glowing breast.
The welcome house of him, my dearest guest.
Where ever, ever, stay, and go not thence
Till nature's sad decree shall call thee hence:
Flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone,
I here, thou there, yet both but one.

ANALYSIS

The poem opens with the psychological metaphors of head and heart, traditional in American literature until the late 20th century, when they were largely displaced by the metaphors of left brain and right brain. Bradstreet expresses such a strong marital bond that when her husband leaves on business, she feels decapitated: "So many steps head from the heart to sever, / If but a neck soon should we be together." She has her own head as well as a heart, but like the hemispheres of the brain, the genders have tended to specialize. This identification of the male with the head and the female with the heart was commonplace for centuries and became a theoretical basis for marriage throughout the Victorian period.

"The Flesh and the Spirit" expresses a puritan or vertical mode of consciousness: It divides the psyche into a hierarchy and affirms the conquest of the lower by the higher--purification. In contrast, "Letter to Her Husband" expresses a transcendental or holistic mode of consciousness: Her psyche is wed to Nature and the cosmos through marriage and children. She has invested in her family: "My joy, my magazine of earthly store." When her husband is gone she feels like the winter, mourning in black: "My sun is gone." Defining the sun as male--such as Apollo--and the moon as female is common in mythologies.

Bradstreet enlarges her scope beyond the Christian, figuratively, through references to the Zodiac. She also identifies herself with the natural world through analogies between the weather and her relationship with her husband: "Whom whilst I 'joyed, nor storms nor frost I felt, / His warmth such frigid colds did cause to melt. / My chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn." The implicit affirmation of sex is boldly

unconventional for a Puritan and is evidence Bradstreet believed that spiritual love in holy matrimony redeemed Flesh, especially through children. In “The Flesh and the Spirit,” Flesh embodies carnal hedonism—“sinful pleasures.”

Her reference to “sweet Sol” attributes sweetness, a pastoral quality of the heart, to her husband, implying that he is balanced like herself. He is away to the south, associated with the warmth of the sun, while she awaits his return in the cold north. “...man is called the little world,” she wrote in her Meditation 62. This analogy, common during the period, explains her call to her husband to return “from Capricorn,” as if he is far away in the southern hemisphere, while she identifies herself with the Tropic of Cancer far in the north. That the literal distance between them is not that great emphasizes that, nevertheless, the emotional distance feels that great. In the Zodiac, Capricorn is the most southerly point and Cancer the most northerly point. These astrological references imply that her marriage unites her with the cosmos. While he is gone, she consoles herself by seeing his features in her children, the future.

The problematic lines are: “I wish my sun may never set, but burn / Within the Cancer of my glowing breast, / The welcome house of him, my dearest guest.” Cancer was a recognized disease at the time, but was not as well known by far as it is today, in particular breast cancer, especially not in a wilderness with no modern medicine, where Calvinist ministers served as doctors. Bradstreet did not intend to evoke the disease, but only the Tropic of Cancer and the most northerly point in the Zodiac: her breast is burning with reciprocal passion, is glowing with love and is his “welcome house.” She would not welcome her husband into a malignant growth. Both “The Flesh and the Spirit” and “Letter to Her Husband” are allegories of denotative signs limited in meaning by their implied contexts. In this respect, Puritan poetry is unlike modern poetry in which imagery often has multiple connotations and sometimes contradictory implications, generating ironies and inviting free associations.

Bradstreet concludes her poem by accepting her husband’s eventual death—“nature’s sad decree”—with the declaration that, even then, their union will transcend space and time: “I here, thou there, yet both but one.” The poem unifies a series of complementary opposites culminating in Life and Death. The rhythm is occasionally awkward, as in the line beginning “My chilled limbs.” Nevertheless, overall, “Letter to Her Husband” is a rare achievement in combining a passionate love poem with an intellectually complex figurative structure of cosmic scope. It is a model of wholeness, a poem deserving comparison to those of English Metaphysical poets such as John Donne (except for the rhythm).

Michael Hollister (2016)