To My Dear and Loving Husband

POEM TEXT

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

SUMMARY

If two people ever became one through marriage, then we have definitely become one. If a husband was ever loved by his wife, then surely you are loved. If ever a wife was happy with her husband, then surely I am happy. Compare your marriages against mine, women, if you can. I value your love more than a gold mine or all the riches that are in the East. My love is like a thirst so strong that not even rivers could satisfy it. Nothing but love from you can satisfy me. And I cannot in any way hope to repay your love. I hope that God will richly reward you for your love. So, while we're alive, let's stay so true to each other so that when we die, we will live forever.

THEMES

LOVE

In poetry of this era—particularly poetry written by Puritans like Bradstreet—love and sexuality are often portrayed as sinful. In "To My Dear and Loving Husband," Bradstreet takes a different approach, describing her relationship with her husband as unifying and eternal, powerful enough to even outlive death. The poem thus presents earthly love as something deeply good and even redemptive.

The poem begins by considering the physical, personal relationship between the speaker and her husband. The speaker notes that the two have become "one," and she stresses their personal happiness—it's so great that she would refuse all the riches in the world for it. The scope of the poem at this point is narrow: the speaker thinks about her marriage in relation to earthly happiness. She does not yet mention broader matters, like religion or the relationship between love and the afterlife.

However, as the poem progresses, the speaker begins to consider the relationship between her love for her husband and her religious faith. This shift begins in line 7, where the speaker alludes to the biblical Song of Solomon, which says: "Many waters cannot quench love." Through that allusion, the speaker connects her own love with the Bible's presentation of love. And, as she notes that "rivers cannot quench" her desire for her husband, she subtly suggests that her love is undying—it will live on even past her own short time on earth.

The speaker builds on this suggestion in the poem's final four lines, where she describes the love she shares with her husband as eternal: it will "persevere" even after "we live no more." Moreover, she suggests that her husband's love will be to his credit when his soul is judged after death. In this sense, the speaker not only argues that her love is everlasting, but that it is *redemptive* in a religious sense. Far from being sinful, then, this love helps her husband (if not necessarily her) to enter heaven.

Do note that the poem celebrates only a very specific kind of love: marital. It's clear, then, that some kinds of love are pure and redemptive, but Bradstreet doesn't say whether her claims apply to *all* love or only to love within marriage.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

WOMEN, DESIRE, AND TRADITION

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is an elegant and, in many ways, traditional love poem. Echoing language from the Bible, the speaker describes her marriage as a union of two separate persons who become one. She emphasizes the force and extent of her love, noting: "My love is such that rivers cannot quench." These are traditional tropes that by Bradstreet's time had been widely used in European love poetry, but with an important difference: until Bradstreet's time, these tropes were almost exclusively used by male poets to describe women—women who didn't have the chance to respond to the poems about them.

Bradstreet reclaims these traditions for her own use. She asserts that women are capable not only of writing poetry, but of expressing love and desire in the same terms that men use. What's more, she uses those very terms to fight against the

misogynistic undercurrents that they often have in poetry written by men.

In writing about her love for her husband, Bradstreet draws on sources like poet Edmund Spenser and the Bible, adapting their modes of writing for her own purposes. The evidence of her deep reading of European love poetry is clear in the poem: she casually and skillfully uses the tropes of that tradition. But the difference is that she writes from the perspective of a married woman. This is quite different from the situation of, say, Petrarch's sonnets, where the poet writes about a distant and unreceptive woman.

Bradstreet thus adapts the tropes of the tradition of love poetry to her own situation as a married woman. And, in doing so, she asserts her capacity to articulate desire and passion—much as a male poet like Petrarch would. The poem argues, implicitly, for the capacity of women to use poetry to express their feelings and desires. This was a controversial argument at the time Bradstreet wrote.

But Bradstreet does not simply recycle the tropes of traditional love poetry: she also speaks back to them. For instance, she compares her love to a thirst so great that "rivers cannot quench [it]." This plays on widespread ideas about the female body in Renaissance medicine, namely that it is overly fluid. Rather than trying to dry her body out, to attain a male ideal, Bradstreet proposes ingesting an enormous quantity of liquid—that is, making her body even more fluid. And she proposes to take this subversive step *within* the traditional context of marriage. Bradstreet seems to be saying that women don't have to repress themselves in order to experience love and passion; she argues that it's possible to reject masculine ideas about what women should be and experience love on her own terms.

Bradstreet's poem thus poses problems and challenges as it uses the tropes of traditional love poetry. She is not content to merely claim these traditions; she also uses them to challenge oppressive and misogynistic forces in her culture.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

MARRIAGE, WEALTH, AND DESIRE

As its title suggests, "To My Dear and Loving Husband," is a poem about married love between a man and wife. It proposes that such love has a powerful effect on the two people involved: as the speaker announces in the first line, they become "one." This suggests that their love is pure and unified. The speaker thus rejects a common view of marriage in Bradstreet's time: that it is a financial transaction, not a partnership. She stresses the value and pleasure of her love for her husband apart from any financial matters: the speaker, at least, would rather have her husband's love than "all the riches that the East doth hold." Love, for the speaker, is compensation in and of itself—she doesn't need any other wealth. For her husband, however, there does still seem to be a transactional aspect to their relationship.

The poem contains a surprising amount of financial language. The speaker refers to her marriage as a "prize" and compares it to "riches" and "gold." These are material riches, the kind of wealth that one uses during life. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the period in which Bradstreet wrote the poem: at this point in history, the ideal of marriage as a partnership had not yet fully emerged and many people treated marriage as a simple financial transaction. But the speaker rebels against this model of marriage. She stresses its non-financial rewards, even as she uses comparisons to material wealth to show how much she loves her husband. However, she also describes her relationship with her husband in financial terms, noting that she cannot "repay" him for his love. Love is still somewhat transactional here.

Then, the speaker prays that "the heavens" will "reward" her husband for his dedication to her, since she can't. In other words, she hopes that his love for her will get him into heaven when his soul is judged at the end of his life. She thus imagines that he will receive a kind of compensation for loving his wife. Tellingly, though, she does not imagine an equivalent form of compensation for herself—she does not ask, for instance, that her own dedication to her husband will help her get into heaven.

It seems, then, that the poem reveals some inequality within the speaker's marriage, and perhaps within all marriages at this time. For the speaker, love is an end in itself—she doesn't need material wealth as long as she has her husband. The husband, however, can expect some kind of compensation--in his next life, if not this one. The poem ultimately suggests that marriage is always a kind of transaction, at least for men--even a marriage as loving and passionate as this one.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

The first four lines of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" establish the poem's themes and formal patterns. In a series of end-stopped lines (though, to be fair, line 3 *could* be argued as

being enjambed in spite of its punctuation), the speaker compares her own marriage to the ideals and histories of marriage in general. In each case, she finds that her marriage is the very best version of marriage. It unites two people who were separate, and it is based on mutual love and satisfaction.

At the start of each line, the speaker repeats the phrase "If ever." This use of anaphora sets the stakes for the poem. The speaker isn't simply praising her own marriage, on its own terms. Rather, she is measuring it against *all* marriages, ever. Further, the use of anaphora helps to bind together these lines so that they build on each other, becoming a single argument for the unique power and value of the speaker's marriage. (This effect is strengthened by the poem's simultaneous use of assonance, with a strong pattern of /e/ and /ee/ sounds through the first four lines). This sense of being both separate and together mirrors the speaker's claim: she and her husband are individuals, but they also form a unit together.

In the poem's first two lines, the combination of anaphora and end-stop forces the speaker to introduce a caesura as well. Since each line is a complete sentence, the "If" clause has to be complemented by a "then" clause. The caesura marks out the parts of these grammatical units, clearly defining cause and effect, hypothesis and conclusion. This structure contributes to the sense that these lines are unusually confident and well-organized: the speaker has perfectly balanced the parts of her sentences and thoughts to fit within a line.

Additionally, in the first three lines of the poem, the speaker directly addresses her husband, using apostrophe. This choice gives the poem the feel of a passionate, but intimate declaration of love, as though the reader were eaves-dropping on a conversation between the speaker and her husband. In line four, the speaker's approach shifts. Instead of comparing her marriage to all marriages, she asks "ye women" to compare their marriages to hers. This is a shift in the poem's use of apostrophe. Instead of directly addressing a specific person, the speaker is now talking to a broad group that might include all women, ever. The poem is thus both public and private, intimate and ceremonial.

The poem's form is also clear and precise throughout these lines, which again underscores the speaker's confidence. The poem is in iambic pentameter couplets, often called "heroic couplets." This is a prestigious form, often reserved for noble, monumental subjects. In taking on the form, and in executing it effortlessly—with strong, clear rhymes and steady meter—the speaker asserts that her marriage is worthy of the form's nobility. What's more, she also argues that women are capable of taking on this prestigious form, a controversial proposition at the time of Bradstreet's writing. In light of this idea, the reference to "ye women" in line 4 becomes even more meaningful. It seems that Bradstreet might be calling women's attention to their own power, even as she seems to brag about her own marriage.

LINES 5-8

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.

In the first four lines of the poem, the speaker makes a series of comparisons, measuring her marriage against the historical ideals of marriage and against other women's marriages. In the next four lines, she focuses instead on her own experience of marriage. She notes how much she values it—so much that she wouldn't trade it for enormous wealth. And she also states how powerful it is: even a river can't quench her thirst for her husband. Throughout these lines, the speaker is playing with symbols, traditions, and allusions that were well-known in her culture.

For instance, in lines 5-6, the speaker notes that she "prize[s]" her husband's love more than "all the riches that the East doth hold." The speaker is not referring to the east as a compass direction. Rather, she is using the word to refer to a specific geographical and cultural location: Asia and the Middle East. She does not refer to these cultures with any specificity or sensitivity to their history and customs. Instead, she plays on the image that many people living in 17th century England and colonial America had of them: as places of opulence and sensuality. She uses the East, in other words, as a symbol of such earthly forms of desire. In doing so, she emphasizes the piety and purity of her love, by implicitly contrasting it with the sensual, earthly pleasures she rejects.

Like much of the poem, these lines are also hyperbolic. However, this hyperbole does not weaken the reader's sense of the speaker's conviction. Rather, it plays on the hyperbole so often used in love poems written by men. In using hyperbole to describe her relationship with her husband, the speaker once again appropriates part of a male tradition, insisting on her capacity—and her right—to do so.

This use of hyperbole constitutes a kind of general allusion to the traditions of European love poetry. In the next two lines, the speaker moves to a more specific allusion. Line 7, "my love is such that rivers cannot quench," refers directly to the Song of Solomon, the Bible's celebration of erotic love. By making this allusion, the speaker calls on the authority of the Bible to back up her claims about her marriage, making it as a holy and pure as the one described in the Bible.

In line 7, the speaker also implicitly calls into question widespread pseudo-scientific medical beliefs at the time of her writing. According to humoral medical theory (which was first developed in Ancient Greece) the physical differences between men and women could be ascribed to differences in heat and dryness. Men were said to have hotter and drier bodies, while women had colder, wetter bodies. Women were often faulted for the liquidity of their bodies--it was a kind of failure to live up

to a male ideal. But Bradstreet argues against that idea here. Even as she insists that her marriage is as holy as the Bible, she also insists that it makes her body even *more* liquid. In other words, her love is both perfect and unapologetically womanly. In this line, her poem rejects humoral theory and male criticisms of the female body.

Lines 5-8 mostly maintain the formal polish of the previous lines, remaining in strong, unvaried meter. They do, however, contain a slant rhyme, between "quench" and "recompense." Though this might seem like a lapse of confidence, there's something apt about the imperfect rhyme. In these lines, the speaker argues that her husband's love alone will satisfy her. The imperfection is thus suggestive: it demonstrates, through the line's sound, how nothing except her husband's love will do.

LINES 9-12

Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

The final four lines of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" are where the poem makes its boldest claims about marriage. For the first eight lines of the poem, the speaker has largely talked about her marriage in earthly terms. Yes, it matches the highest ideals of the institution; yes, she would choose it over sensual pleasures. But so far, the poem has not addressed the most important questions for a devout Puritan poet like Anne Bradstreet: questions about salvation, heaven, and the afterlife. In the poem's final four lines, she makes a strong case that marriage will help her and her husband achieve salvation. In doing so, she implicitly opposes other Puritan poets, like George Herbert, who often argue that salvation requires relinquishing earthly love in favor of divine love. For the speaker, earthly love and divine love are closely linked to each other.

The speaker begins to make this argument in lines 9-10. In line 9, she returns to the financial concerns of lines 5-6. Though she doesn't want gold, her husband might—and she is unable to "repay" him for his love. She thus hopes that he will receive his reward in heaven. In other words, she suggests that his love *could* count toward his credit when his soul is judged; his love is part of what makes him a good Christian. However, it is worth noting that only the husband is rewarded in the afterlife for his love. The speaker does not seem to think that she too might deserve to be rewarded for *her* love.

In the poem's final two lines, the speaker spells out the suggestion of the previous two lines. If she and her husband preserve the intensity and piety of their love, they "may live ever"—they will enjoy the bliss of heaven together. Taken together, these lines make a bold claim about marriage. Not only is the speaker's marriage an accomplishment of all the ideals of the institution, it also models a passionate relationship that *contributes* to the salvation of those involved, rather than marking them as sinful.

As the speaker makes these grand claims, the grandeur of her writing increases to reflect them. For the first time in the poem, she employs alliteration and consonance with considerable intensity, using a pattern of /l/ and /n/ sounds. This gives these lines an elaborate, literary feel. This is reinforced by the return of caesura, particularly in lines 11 and 12. Like the poem's opening lines, these lines are perfectly balanced, with a hypothesis separated from its conclusion by a caesura. However, the grammar of the lines is less certain, and one may read line 11 as either an end-stopped or an enjambed line.

Because these lines are otherwise strongly end-stopped, the speaker omits words like "because" or "therefore," which would guide the reader through the lines and explain their logical connections. The speaker's use of asyndeton asks readers to assemble those logical connections for themselves--it's as if the speaker is calling on readers to be as bold and imaginative as she is.

The only formal surprise in these lines comes in line 10, which is a metrically ambiguous line. It is perhaps best to scan it as an amphibrach (a stressed syllable between two unstressed syllables) followed by four iambs. That makes for a strange and awkward substitution, almost as though the speaker were recoiling at the boldness of her own argument.

SYMBOLS

EAST

When the speaker talks about the "East," she is not referring to a direction, but rather to a culture (or a set of cultures) distant from her own. For people living in colonial America in the 17th century, the East was an exotic and opulent place, full of sensual and material riches. It symbolizes, for the speaker, all of the pleasures and wealth available in this world. It is thus also implicitly a sinful place full of earthly delights—just the opposite of the simplicity and piousness that Puritans like Bradstreet prized.

By choosing her husband's love over these worldly riches, the speaker asserts her own piousness and her commitment to the spiritual over the material. Of course, her view of Eastern cultures is, at best, highly stereotyped and largely inaccurate. Bradstreet uses the East as a simple symbol of earthly pleasure, rather than making reference to any real facts about Eastern cultures.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "East"

HEAVENS

Literally, the "heavens" include everything that hangs over the earth: stars, moon, sun, clouds, atmosphere, etc. But the speaker of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" is not asking the stars or the clouds to reward her husband for his love. (Indeed, she would probably consider such a request to be blasphemous, since it would be giving them powers that, in a Christian context, belong exclusively to God himself). Instead, she uses the "heavens" as a symbol for God himself, who, in Christian theology, resides in the heavens and judges human life. In this sense, she is hoping that her husband's devotion to her will help him earn salvation in this life and a place in heaven in the next.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "heavens"

POETIC DEVICES

HYPERBOLE

As she praises her husband and her marriage, the speaker of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" often uses elaborate, exaggerated language. For instance, the speaker announces:

> I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
> Or all the riches that the East doth hold.

There's no reason to doubt the sincerity of the speaker's proclamation, but readers may feel that the language here is over-the-top, hyperbolic. However beautiful and moving this language may be, it is doubtless distant from the mundane daily reality of their marriage.

Hyperbole is widely used in Renaissance love poetry, particularly in the Petrarchan tradition. Male poets often describe the women they love in highly idealized terms. In "To My Dear and Loving Husband," Bradstreet reclaims hyperbole as a technique. The poem argues, implicitly, that a female poet is just as capable as a male poet of describing love in highly idealized, hyperbolic terms. Further, in the Petrarchan tradition, the poet generally praises a distant and inaccessible woman—someone with whom he'll never have a real relationship. But Bradstreet transforms the device: instead of describing an inaccessible object of desire, it describes a real relationship, making that relationship as dramatic and exalted as any Petrarchan obsession.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Line 12

END-STOPPED LINE

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is a heavily end-stopped poem. This device contributes to the poem's sense of self-assurance and control. Most, if not all, of the speaker's thoughts fit neatly into one line; there is rarely a discrepancy between the poem's meter and its grammar. Though it describes a passionate marriage—and makes a strong argument for the holiness of marriage itself—the speaker has not lost herself in a burst of erotic passion. Rather, she remains calm and collected.

In this sense, the end-stops underscore the speaker's control and strengthen the poem's argument. From a Christian standpoint, erotic love is sinful because it deprives people of their capacity to make reasonable decisions. (Shakespeare makes just this argument in Sonnet 129). But, with her heavy end-stops, the speaker emphasizes that, within marriage, it is possible to experience erotic passion while remaining reasonable and focused.

However, not all of the poem's end-stops are equally strong—and readers may experience several of the poem's lines as enjambments. For instance, line 11 is arguably enjambed. It depends on how one reads the grammar of the sentence. One might read line 11 as a complete sentence. In this case, it would read something like: "While we're still alive, let's persevere in love just as we are now." Line 12 would also be a complete sentence, reading something like, "So that when we die, we may live forever." However, one might also read the two lines together in a single sentence: "While we're still alive, let's persevere in love just as we are now, so that when we die, we may live forever." If these lines are just one complete thought, they introduce a kind of wobble or stutter at the end of the poem: just when the speaker announces her grandest ambitions for marriage, she loses the control (shown by firm end-stops) that had marked the poem so far—perhaps because she is reluctant to impose upon God and tell him what to do.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we."
- **Line 2:** "thee."
- **Line 3:** "man,"
- **Line 4:** "can."
- **Line 5:** "gold,"
- **Line 6:** "hold."
- **Line 7:** "quench,"
- **Line 8:** "recompense."
- **Line 9:** "repay;"
- **Line 10:** "pray."
- **Line 11:** "persever,"
- **Line 12:** "ever."

ANAPHORA

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" opens with a run of

anaphoric lines: the speaker repeats the phrase "If ever" at the start of each of the poem's first three lines. In each of these lines, the speaker compares her marriage against the ideal images of marriage—and finds that her marriage measures up. In other words, it is as good as the best marriages ever.

By repeating the initial phrase, "If ever" across each of these comparisons, the speaker generates a sense of accumulation. Although each of these lines is end-stopped, and therefore cut off from the others grammatically, the anaphora nonetheless allows them to build on one another. Each line strengthens the force of the previous line—and gives the reader a sense of the speaker's confidence and conviction in the value of her marriage.

What's more, these lines create an impression of single entities coming together with a shared purpose. The anaphora allows the lines to form one coherent point while still remaining separate from each other. This structure--separate, but unified--mirrors the way that the speaker talks about her husband. Like these lines, they are individuals, but just as the lines work together seamlessly, so too do the speaker and her husband become a unified team ("two were one").

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "If ever"
- **Line 2:** "If ever"
- **Line 3:** "If ever"

ASYNDETON

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is heavily end-stopped, including in lines 9 and 10. As a result, the speaker has an opportunity here to use a coordinating conjunction to connect her thoughts—but she doesn't. Instead of explicitly spelling out the connections between her thoughts, the speaker asks the reader to supply those connections for themselves, using asyndeton:

> Thy love is such I can no way repay;
> The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.

There is a clear logical connection between the two lines: the speaker wants "the heavens" to "reward" her husband because she cannot "repay" him. But the speaker does not make this connection explicit—though the lines could easily read: "Thy love is such I can in no way repay, *therefore* I pray the heavens reward thee manifold" (or some more metrical alternative). Here, the speaker makes the reader responsible for building the precise connection between these two lines. This demand on the reader serves as a kind of preparation for the grand statement to come in the poem's final couplet. That is, the asyndeton here puts the reader in the mindset of having to be creative and bold--just as the speaker herself is creative and bold when making her final claim about the nature of love.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Thy love is such I can no way repay; / The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray."

CAESURA

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" contains a number of caesurae. The most thematically important of these occur in lines 1, 2, 10, and 12. In each of these lines, caesura is used in a similar way. In the first part of the line, the speaker makes a hypothetical statement: "If ever two were one..." "When we live no more..." In the second half of the line, the speaker explores the consequences of that hypothetical statement: "then surely we [are];" "we may live ever." In each case the caesura separates the two parts of the line, cleanly dividing cause and effect, hypothesis and conclusion. Because each of these lines are end-stopped, they are complete units in themselves, and the caesura marks the internal parts of that unit. (Depending on one's reading, something similar may be happening in line 11: if one reads it as an end-stopped line, it again divides a cause from an effect).

In line 4, the caesura functions differently: it separates an instance of apostrophe directed to "ye women" from the rest of the line. This is a less significant instance of the device; the line would not be impaired or changed if it were taken out.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", " ", "
- **Line 10:** ", "
- **Line 11:** ", "
- **Line 12:** ", "

APOSTROPHE

The speaker of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" uses apostrophe throughout the poem, in two different ways. First, the poem is directly addressed to her husband: she is speaking to him, articulating the value and beauty of their marriage. This is a specific form of apostrophe: she is speaking to a real person, someone she knows well. Although the poem is very formal and controlled, the apostrophe directed at the speaker's husband nonetheless gives the poem a sense of intimacy—the reader feels almost as though they are overhearing a conversation between husband and wife.

By contrast, in line 4, the speaker addresses a broad, generic group: "ye women." The speaker is not addressing a particular group of women, but rather all women at all times. The intimacy of the speaker's address to her husband is replaced here by a

more general form of apostrophe. The poem is thus simultaneously intimate and public, specific and general: it concerns the precise dynamics of the speaker's marriage while also making claims about all marriages in all times. By addressing "women" in particular, the speaker also suggests that this poem contains a message for her female contemporaries--perhaps part of what she wants them to pay attention to is the very fact that women can and should experience this kind of all-consuming passion.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 4
- Lines 5-12

ALLUSION

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" contains two kinds of allusion, specific and general. In line 7, the speaker makes an explicit allusion to the Song of Solomon: "many waters cannot quench love," the Bible says. For the speaker and her early readers, living in a Puritan religious settlement in colonial America, the allusion would've been obvious and notable. Through it, the speaker subtly legitimizes her own love. She is saying that it is as forceful—and as pure—as the love described in a biblical passage famous for its passionate description of erotic love.

More generally, the poem also makes repeated allusion to the usual rhetorical techniques and tropes of Petrarchan love poetry—for instance, in its use of hyperbole. In this case, the poem's use of allusion is somewhat different. In its allusion to the Bible, the poem draws on the Bible's authority to support its own discussion of love. In its implicit allusions to the Petrarchan tradition, however, it contests the terms and limits of that tradition. By using the tools of this poetic tradition, it highlights the differences between this poem and more traditional ones—namely, that this one is being written by a woman instead of a man, and that it talks about love in the context of a close relationship rather than a removed admiration.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "My love is such that rivers cannot quench"

ALLITERATION

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is not a strongly alliterative poem. Though the poem does contain some alliteration, much of it is incidental. For example, there is an alliteration on a /th/ sound throughout the second half of the poem, but much of that repeated sound comes from words like "that," "the," and "thee"—words that are not particularly thematically significant. The lack of alliteration gives the poem a plain-spoken feel: instead of sounding like a grand, ambitious poetic statement, it feels intimate, direct, and unpretentious.

But "To My Dear and Loving Husband" actually is an ambitious poem; it does make grand claims about the speaker's marriage. Those claims sneak up on the reader, and it is only in the final lines that the poem showcases its full ambition. Unsurprisingly, as the poem reveals that ambition, its use of alliteration also intensifies: the final two lines include flashy, loud alliterations on /w/ and /l/ sounds. As the speaker's tone and ambition rise, the literary sophistication of her writing rises as well, delivering a set of ostentatious and grand lines supported by alliteration.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "w," "o," "th," "w"
- **Line 2:** "th," "th"
- **Line 4:** "C," "c"
- **Line 5:** "m," "m"
- **Line 6:** "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 7:** "c," "q"
- **Line 10:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 11:** "Th," "wh," "w," "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "Th," "wh," "w," "l," "m," "w," "m," "l"

ASSONANCE

In contrast to its relatively sparing use of alliteration, "To My Dear and Loving Husband" uses assonance throughout—sometimes with considerable intensity. The use of assonance often works with and supports the poem's other devices. For instance, the first three lines contain a strong chain of assonance, using /e/ and /ee/ sounds. That pattern of repeated sound emphasizes (and emerges from) the poem's use of anaphora in those same lines. Like the anaphora, the assonance in these lines helps bind together and emphasize the way they build on each other without enjambment or grammatical connections.

The poem thus uses assonance as a way of working against the effects of its heavy reliance on end-stopped lines. Though the end-stopped lines suggest that each of the poem's lines are complete, self-contained, assonance subtly dissolves the borders between them. It's worth noting that these fading boundaries seem to mirror the speaker's connection with her husband. That is, the two of them are distinct individuals, just as the poem's lines are distinct from each other, but they're also completely unified as a couple—just as the poem is unified through devices like assonance.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "e," "o," "e," "o," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e," "e," "e," "e," "ee"
- **Line 3:** "e," "e," "a," "a," "a," "a"

- **Line 4:** “o,” “e,” “e,” “o”
- **Line 5:** “l,” “o,” “o,” “i,” “o”
- **Line 6:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 7:** “o,” “u,” “ue”
- **Line 8:** “ou,” “u,” “o,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 9:** “u,” “ay,” “ay”
- **Line 10:** “ay”
- **Line 11:** “e,” “e,” “i,” “i,” “o,” “e,” “o,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 12:** “e,” “e,” “i,” “o,” “o,” “i,” “e,” “e”

CONSONANCE

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" uses consonance in much the same way it uses assonance. Though the poem is relatively sparing in its use of alliteration, it uses other plays of sound to bind together its otherwise highly distinct, even disjointed lines. Of particular interest, then, are moments when consonance stretches across several lines, as in the heavy use of /n/ and /v/ sounds in the final two lines:

> Then while we live, in love let’s so persever,
> That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Though there is some ambiguity about how to read these lines—some readers may see them as two separate grammatical units, while others might see one, enjambed sentence—the two lines are bound together by sound in either case. There is a strong pattern of alliteration on the /l/ sound and, alongside it, the /n/ sound. This /n/ sound appears in some of the key words in the passage, words like "then" and "when," which establish a causal relationship between the couple's happy marriage and their future salvation. In a poem that is often reluctant to explain the relationships between its lines, the use of consonance helps guide the reader through those relationships--and through the relationship between the speaker and her beloved husband.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “r,” “w,” “w,” “o,” “n,” “n,” “r,” “w”
- **Line 2:** “r,” “n,” “w,” “r,” “w,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 3:** “r,” “w,” “w,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 4:** “C,” “m,” “w,” “m,” “w,” “m,” “c”
- **Line 5:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 6:** “th,” “th,” “t,” “th,” “t,” “d,” “th,” “d”
- **Line 7:** “ch,” “t,” “c,” “nn,” “t,” “q,” “n,” “ch”
- **Line 8:** “t,” “t,” “v,” “v”
- **Line 9:** “v,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 10:** “v”
- **Line 11:** “Th,” “n,” “w,” “l,” “w,” “l,” “v,” “n,” “l,” “v,” “l,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “v”
- **Line 12:** “Th,” “w,” “n,” “w,” “l,” “v,” “n,” “m,” “w,” “m,” “l,” “v,” “v”

VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 2, Line 8, Line 10) - "Thee" is a now-obsolete synonym for the word "you." In the past, English—like most other European languages—had two ways of saying "you," one formal and the other informal. "Thee" was an informal way of addressing someone; it implies intimacy and familiarity.

Ye (Line 4) - "Ye" is a now-obsolete pronoun. It is synonymous with a word like "y'all:" it was used to address a group of people, rather than a specific person.

Thy (Line 5, Line 9) - "Thy" is a now-obsolete pronoun. It is equivalent in contemporary speech to "your." Until roughly the end of the 19th century, English had two different ways of saying "you" and "your"—one formal and one informal. "Thy" is informal: it's a pronoun that close friends and family members would use with each other. The speaker's use of it thus suggests, appropriately enough, the intimacy and familiarity of her relationship with her husband.

East (Line 6) - The "East" is one of the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, and West) that people use to navigate the world. However, the speaker does not use the word in this neutral sense. Rather, for her, the east is a specific geographic region: Asia and the Middle East. In Bradstreet's culture, this region was associated with wealth and opulence; it seemed very foreign and strange to a British woman living in an American colony in the mid-17th century. The use of the word "East" thus marks the speaker's position in geographic and cultural space and also brings to mind distant riches.

Recompense (Line 8) - "Recompense" has two primary meanings, both of which are relevant to "To My Dear and Loving Husband." First, the word describes an act of reparation or atonement: if someone injures or insults another person, they might offer recompense to right the wrong. The word's second sense is less fraught: it simply describes a payment or a wage, something offered in return for work or a service.

Heavens (Line 10) - The word "heavens" functions a catch-all descriptor for everything that hangs above the earth: the stars, the sky, the moon, the atmosphere. It is often used metaphorically, however, as a symbol for God himself, who is traditionally believed to live in the heavens and, from there, to observe and judge human actions.

Manifold (Line 10) - In the sense that Bradstreet uses the word, "manifold" means "generously" or, simply, "well." It can also mean "many," but here, the speaker simply hopes that her husband will receive a rich and worthy reward for his dedication to her.

Persever (Line 11) - A contracted spelling of the word "persevere." To persevere is to survive, to endure—despite significant challenges or opposition. The word thus describes an iron-clad commitment, a refusal to bend or break from a goal

or purpose.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem doesn't follow a specific overall form and instead consists of six rhyming couplets, creating twelve lines total. As we'll talk about more in rhyme scheme, these iambic pentameter couplets are more specifically something called "heroic couplets"—a form usually used to talk about big, important subjects. This suggests just how highly the speaker thinks of her love for her husband.

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is also a highly end-stopped poem. As a result, many of its lines stand on their own conceptually; there is not always a clear relationship between one line and the next, nor is there a clear order or logical progression to the poem. (For example, the first two lines could be reversed without really changing the poem's meaning.) There are places in the poem, however, where the second line of the couplet completes or comments on the idea set up in the first line, for instance in lines 9-10:

> Thy love is such I can no way repay;
> The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.

Line 10 acts almost as a response to line 9: since the speaker cannot repay her husband, she prays for Heaven to reward him. There is an implied causal relationship between the two lines—though the speaker does not spell it out. Instead, the reader is asked to assemble the pieces, to find the places in the poem where there are strong relationships between the lines of the couplets.

METER

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a meter with a distinguished pedigree in English poetry: it was used by some of the poets Bradstreet most admired, including Shakespeare and Spenser. In taking on the meter, she is demonstrating her capacity to write literary poetry—demonstrating more broadly that women can write as skillfully as men can, a controversial point at the time she was writing. Bradstreet makes her point thoroughly: the meter of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" is exceptionally precise and regular. There are no metrical variations to speak of until line 10. Line 10 is slightly more complicated than the previous lines:

> The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray

The opening of the line is metrically ambiguous. After an unstressed and a stressed syllable, there are two unstressed syllables. This is an unexpected and disturbing hiccup after nearly a hundred syllables of iambic writing. Further, they make the line hard to scan with any certainty. It is tempting to read the first two syllables of the line as an iamb followed by a pyrrhic—but then the rest of the line becomes trochaic. Better, then, to read the first three syllables as an amphibrach (one stressed syllable between two unstressed syllables) followed by four iambs:

> The heavens | reward | thee man- | ifold, | I pray

Though it is unusual to encounter amphibrachs in English poetry, they were used in the 17th century with some regularity as metrical variations.

After this disturbance, the following lines return to regular iambs (although both lines 11 and 12 have feminine endings). With the exception of a few moments of slight disturbance, the poem and the poet thus proudly display their mastery of a difficult and prestigious meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" is a poem in rhyming couplets:

> AABBCCDDEEFF

None of the poem's rhymes occur in more than one couplet. This non-repeating rhyme scheme affects the reader's experience of the poem: the poem feels somewhat loose and unstructured. Its couplets are piled on top of each other, seemingly at random. For example, one might easily reverse the order of the first two couplets without seriously affecting the content or narrative of the poem. Though the poem's argument does build over the course of its twelve lines, the poem's rhyme scheme does not highlight or mark the internal variations in the argument.

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" generally uses strong, direct rhymes—most of which are one syllable. These strong rhymes convey a sense of confidence and self-assurance: though the speaker is making bold claims, she apparently does not feel any uncertainty about their merit. The major exception comes in lines 7-8:

> My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
> Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.

"Quench" and "recompense" are, at best, slant rhymes. The introduction of slant rhyme is perhaps surprising: it seems like a moment of hesitation or complication in an otherwise smooth and confident poem. There is something apt and appropriate about using slant rhyme here. In these lines, the speaker emphasizes the depth of her love—and argues that only her husband's love will satisfy her. The imperfection in the rhyme scheme suggests the failure of other pleasures to satisfy her.

The lines are specifically rhyming iambic pentameter couplets, which are also called "heroic couplets." As their name suggests,

heroic couplets are usually reserved for grand, important subjects: battles, political events, philosophical disputes. There is thus some tension between the rhyme scheme, with its grandiosity, and its subject: the love between married people, which tends to be rather more mundane. But the poem attempts to resolve this tension. By using a lofty form for a simple subject, Bradstreet subtly asserts that her marriage is as important and dignified as any traditionally "heroic" subject. The poem moves slowly to justify that assertion, beginning with the speaker's personal happiness. But, by its end, it has moved to weighty, monumental concerns—salvation, eternal life—and it argues that marriage is central to these issues. The content of the poem thus turns out to justify its formal ambition.

SPEAKER

Like many of Bradstreet's poems, "To My Dear and Loving Husband" is almost certainly autobiographical. Bradstreet does not pretend that she and the speaker are somehow separate or distant from each other; instead, she speaks directly in her own voice. Indeed, because the poem was only published posthumously—and because the poems that were published in her lifetime were published without her permission—there is something voyeuristic about reading this poem. It is addressed to a specific person (Simon Bradstreet, Anne's husband) and written in the context of a specific relationship between two real people, and it's possible that Bradstreet never intended anyone but her husband to read it.

However, despite its intimacy with Bradstreet's life, the poem treats her marriage with her husband in generic and idealized terms: the reader does not learn much about, say, their daily routines or how they fell in love. Instead, in the poem's opening lines, the speaker describes her marriage by comparing it to other marriages—and to the ideals of marriage as an institution. Though the reader does not learn much about Bradstreet's specific marriage, they do learn that it models the virtues of marriage more broadly. As a result, it is easy to separate the poem from the circumstances of Bradstreet's life and instead read it as a general statement on marriage. The speaker of the poem is thus two people at once: a real historical individual, with a specific life and husband, and a generic advocate for the pleasures and benefits of marriage more broadly.

SETTING

The setting of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" is vague and generic. The poem makes only one geographical reference, to the "East." The reference suggests that the speaker is not from the "East," since she regards it as a distant and exotic space. But otherwise, the speaker makes no explicit references to the time and place of the poem's composition, nor does she situate her argument in historical or geographic space. This contributes to the poem's sense of generality; it seems that it might apply to any marriage at any moment in history.

This vague sense of place is particularly notable--and perhaps even strange--given Bradstreet's own historical position. Bradstreet migrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, early in the colony's life, and her family was central to its government. But while this poem does not describe her life in America in any detail or reflect on the life of the colony, its argument may nonetheless be colored by the setting of Bradstreet's real life. For instance, Bradstreet's insistence here that women can write poetry and experience passionate love implies that the world around her thought just the opposite. It seems, then, that Bradstreet's historical moment does inform the poem, even though the speaker doesn't mention it specifically.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

By the mid 17th century, when Bradstreet wrote "To My Dear and Loving Husband," European poets had developed a vigorous and prestigious tradition of love poetry. The fathers of this tradition were Petrarch and Dante, two Italian poets from the 13th and 14th centuries. They set the agenda for much of the love poetry that followed—indeed, there is a whole tradition of love poetry referred to as "Petrarchan."

Though there is a great deal of internal variation in these traditions, the basic set-up remains constant: a male poet writes about a distant, inaccessible woman—someone so beautiful and so resistant to his love that the speaker is thrown into despair. The resulting poems are often melodramatic; they tend to praise the women in question in elaborate and idealized terms. Meanwhile, the women in these poems are routinely silent.

However, in the early 17th century, a number of women began to speak back to these traditions and reclaim them. For instance, in the early 17th century, Lady Mary Wroth wrote and published her own Petrarchan sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Though the sequence remains traditional in many ways, it nonetheless asserts that a female poet—and a female speaker—might articulate her desires through traditions developed by male poets. (The response from male readers was predictably harsh: one reader publicly described Wroth as a "hermaphrodite"—for him, a bitter insult).

Bradstreet arguably goes further than Wroth in "To My Dear and Loving Husband." Though she continues to use tropes from the history of European poetry, her poem scrambles the tradition's usual set-up. Instead of being about a distant, inaccessible love object, Bradstreet's poem is about marriage: her husband is present and already committed to her. Though she continues to idealize their relationship (and though her

husband does not have the chance to respond to her characterization of him), she has transplanted the tropes she uses into an altogether new context, developing a new kind of love poem in the process.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Anne Bradstreet was born in England in the early 17th century, but she and her husband, Simon Bradstreet, migrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, where the Bradstreets became an important political family. Both Bradstreet's husband and her father became governors of the colony. The Bradstreets emigrated to America because of their religious beliefs: both Anne and her husband were devout Puritans, a radical Protestant sect that was persecuted in England in the first half of the 17th century. They thus sought in America the freedom to practice their religion.

While they may have found religious freedom in colonial Massachusetts, the colony remained subject to the prejudices of its time. The religious life of the colony was structured and controlled by male political and religious figures; women who challenged their positions, such as Anne Hutchinson, were exiled from it. Bradstreet thus found herself in a difficult, complicated position as a poet. Her writing was potentially threatening to her male relatives' political standing in a society that actively suppressed women's voices.

Throughout her writing, Bradstreet suppresses much of this historical context. She never, for instance, describes an American landscape or the political machinations of colonial society. Her work refuses to engage with the circumstances of her life, turning instead to classical and European models. However, she does consistently address the paradoxes and dangers of writing as a woman in her society. She is consistently apologetic about her writing. In a verse letter to her father, "To Her Most Honoured Father Thomas Dudley Esq. These Humbly Presented," she notes, "My goods are true (though poor)." Bradstreet is humble about her work—and with good reason. A poet of considerable skill and ambition, Bradstreet surely did not consider her work "poor," but she had to pretend otherwise to avoid being seen as an overly ambitious woman writer.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Anne Bradstreet Biography — A detailed biography of Anne Bradstreet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-bradstreet)
- A Letter to Her Husband, Absent Upon Publick Employment by Anne Bradstreet — Another poem by Anne Bradstreet about her husband, Simon Bradstreet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50288/a-letter-to-her-husband-absent-upon-publick-employment)
- Biography of Petrarch — A detailed biography of Petrarch, with comments on his legacy and impact on European love poetry, from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/poet/petrarch)
- Search on for burial site of America's first published poet — An article from the AP on the search to discover Anne Bradstreet's burial site, with several photos of her manuscripts and early editions of her works. (https://www.apnews.com/32de5af749f44f258e07f79353801985)
- "To My Dear and Loving Husband" Read Aloud — "To My Dear and Loving Husband" read aloud by Liza Ross. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRBjI7P7a4g)

HOW TO CITE

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