# Female Poetic Representations of Religion in Early America: Exploring Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson

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2024/25 Term A

**Abstract**

Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), two of early American literature's most canonized poets, each explore nature, human relationships, and religion and God. Though Bradstreet and Dickinson lived two centuries apart, each poet was similarly influenced by New England religious culture. Scholars have considered Bradstreet and Dickinson together, especially through feminist theory and theological readings. Many of Dickinson's poems, including "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]," "["Faith" is a fine invention]," and "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]," and Bradstreet's including "Contemplations" and "To My Dear and Loving Husband" demonstrate how both poets explore spiritual questions and personal religion in their work. As Bradstreet and Dickinson use poetry as a medium for personal religious discovery, both poets examine theological questions in their work, using language and structure to explore nature and human relationships. While some scholars argue that Bradstreet and Dickinson's spiritual poetic explorations present radical feminist rejections of Christianity, this paper argues that Dickinson and Bradstreet instead present new theological thinking focused on God's doings in the world.

**Introduction**

Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson, though they lived two centuries apart, remain celebrated and widely read. In the literary canon, the two female poets often serve as bookends to the era modern scholars and educators accept as early America. Each poet's work has become an accepted representation of inner life for an educated American woman living in the seventeenth century for Bradstreet and the nineteenth for Dickinson. A close reading of their poetry, each writer's replete with strong symbolism and poetic mastery, invites readers to think critically about the legacy of these great American poets.

Upon my first encounter with Anne Bradstreet's poetry, I was at once fascinated by her melodic poetry and, perhaps, even more fascinated by her personal biography. Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672) cannot and should not escape associations with the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony. Born in 1612 Northampton, England, Bradstreet grew up comfortably on the Earl of Lincoln's estate, for her father was the Earl's steward. Bradstreet eventually married her father's assistant, Cambridge graduate Simon Bradstreet, in 1628. Two years later, the newlyweds sailed to Salem to join her parents in the newly founded Massachusetts Bay Colony. Bradstreet and her husband established their life together in America and she went on to mother eight children ("Anne Bradstreet" 249–251). Within the colony, Anne Bradstreet and her family held particularly social power; Bradstreet's father served as the second governor of Massachusetts and her husband assumed the same role seven years after her death (Hensley xxiv). Anne Bradstreet began writing poetry that detailed her experience as a mother and wife in early New England, exploring classical and historical themes, and celebrating her Puritan faith. Bradstreet's poetry at first read appears conventional but closer reading reveals Bradstreet's inner thoughts, particularly her struggles with restrictive Puritan culture as she navigated her faith in a promised heavenly afterlife with her familial love and material interests in the human world.

Emily Dickinson's poetry similarly captured me. Her flowery writing and complicated analogies continue to fascinate me and, each time I have read a new or familiar poem, my appreciation for Dickinson's poetic excellences and understanding of her expression grows. Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) spent her entire life in New England. Born in Amherst on December 10, 1830, Dickinson grew up in and spent nearly all of her life living with her family in their mansion, the Homestead. Like Bradstreet, Dickinson grew up in an educated, privileged, and religious family. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a prominent lawyer and local politician

who eventually joined the House of Representatives in 1853 (“Emily Dickinson” 1248). Dickinson’s father was devoutly religious; he often read Bible passages to his children and led family prayers (Gilpin 2). Despite her family’s engagement in religious culture, Dickinson herself kept distance from her community’s organized Puritanism (“Emily Dickinson” 1248). Importantly, Dickinson lived in the wake of the second Great Awakening, which marked a shift away from the austere and strict Puritan tradition and towards a more “genteel” Christianity (*Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* 11). The publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* at the beginning of Dickinson’s poetic career in particular marked a shift towards scientific thinking and also placed Christianity in flux as new doubts about the validity of the Bible as the sole authority on the natural order arose out of conflicting new intellectual ideas (*The Tender Pioneer* 151). Still, Dickinson’s religious family held onto Puritan legacies of strict piety, belief in predestination, and an increasing emphasis on one’s personal relationship with God as they continued practicing their faith in the local Congregational church. Emily Dickinson, however, refused to join Amherst’s First Congregational Church and rarely attended services as an adult (Gilpin 2). After leaving home to attend school at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Dickinson returned home for good in 1848 and led an increasingly reclusive life. At home, Dickinson maintained robust correspondence with her network of friends and privately wrote nearly 1,800 poems (“Emily Dickinson” 1248–1250). Dickinson’s poem, largely discovered only after her death in 1886, are innovative and lyrical explorations of topics including nature, death, love, and religion. Dickinson’s poetry was quickly published by her friends and family beginning with the first volume, *Poems*, in 1890. However, drastic editorial changes and ongoing disputes between Dickinson’s friend Mabel Loomis Todd and sister-in-law Susan Dickinson delayed a complete and authentic edition, which scholar Thomas H. Johnson finally compiled in 1955 (“Emily

Dickinson" 1250–1). Dickinson's poetry has continued to fascinate scholars, students, and general readers since its initial publication. Dickinson's syntax, diction, metaphor, and tone set her apart from contemporaries and help solidify Dickinson as one of America's most innovative and expressive poets.

Similarities between Dickinson and Bradstreet abound. Both women lived as privileged members of religious New England communities and used poetry to express discretely some of their innermost ideas and opinions. Reading Bradstreet's and Dickinson's together poetry reveals many shared themes, both reflecting their parallel biographies reaching outside of their similar life experiences. Specifically, Bradstreet and Dickinson each examine religion in their poetry, presenting complex and developing understandings of spirituality and their individual relationships to the established religions of their respective New Englands. In this paper, I will explore the religious imagery and themes in Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson's poetry through a close reading of selected poems. I read Bradstreet's and Dickinson's poetry through a theological lens and argue that their spiritual and religious poetry represents poetic questioning not of God Himself, but of the institutionalized performance of beliefs and observances as practiced by the Puritans and Congregationalists in power during each of the poet's lives.

**Literature Review**

Scholarship surrounding Anne Bradstreet has often focused on Bradstreet's unique experience as a published female writer of high social status in the restrictive Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony. Literature critics have considered her poetry particularly in light of her biography rather than its artistic merit. For instance, Charlotte Gordon (2005) uses Bradstreet's poems to construct the writer's biography and to reconstruct seventeenth-century

Puritan America.[1] Similarly, Jean Marie Lutes (1997) uses Bradstreet's poetry to explore Puritan understandings, both scientific and religious, about the female body and birth. Bradstreet's identity as a woman and wife in Puritan New England means her poetry reflects not only her unique voice but stands in to represent the mostly underrepresented broader voice of early Puritan women.

Some important scholarship does focus primarily on Bradstreet's work as a poet. Influential twentieth-century scholarship from Robert D. Richardson (1967), Kenneth A. Requa (1974), and Robert C. Wess (1976) considers the thematic and stylistic elements and rhetorical effects of Bradstreet's poetry. Richardson focuses on Bradstreet's descriptive language and formal structures, highlighting her adept navigation of Shakespearean and classical tradition and innovative natural imagery in her poem "Contemplations." Requa notably takes up Bradstreet's poetic voice, contrasting her public and private voices as he considers Bradstreet's elegies. In his essay, Wess also examines contrast in Bradstreet's poetry, noting specifically two dichotomies, those between doubt and faith and between physical and spiritual love.

While early scholars consider Bradstreet as a serious poet, most recent scholarship returns to focus on Bradstreet's biography. Beginning in the late twentieth century, scholars began using Bradstreet's Puritan background as the starting point to analyze her poetry through a subversive lens, shifting focus from reading Bradstreet as a Puritan exemplar to reading her as an original American feminist. Wendy Martin (1984) reflects this shift as she reads Bradstreet's work through a radical feminist lens and in feminist literary discourse. Martin's book reflects the tradition of framing Bradstreet through her biography, but her work, particularly her

[1]Specifically, Gordon's *Mistress Bradstreet* uses poetry to enhance biographical details from various sources including contemporary letters, journals, and religious texts and to envision Bradstreet's feelings and emotions throughout her life.

consideration of Bradstreet, Dickinson, and Rich together, provides an important foundation for contemporary feminist readings of Bradstreet's poetry. Martin suggests that Bradstreet's duty as a Puritan wife and mother was performative and that she often questioned male authority and deeply and emotionally sought out validation for her independent experiences (Martin 15–19).

Modern scholars have continued Martin's project by reading Bradstreet's poetry through a feminist lens rather than a religious one. Allison Giffen (2010), Marion Rust (2016), and Ana Schwartz (2021) present contemporary negotiations with early feminist readings of Bradstreet Rust also takes on Bradstreet and Rich, focusing instead on how two versions of Rich's essay on Bradstreet trace her relationship with Audre Lorde and the late-twentieth century "feminist phenomena of the open-letter" (Rust 93). Rich's essay itself also casts Bradstreet as a literary feminist, concluding that "…any woman for whom the feminist breaking of silence has been a transforming voice can also look back" to Bradstreet's work and life and see "faint improbable outlines of unaskable questions, curling in her brain cells…" (Rich xxii). Schwartz's essay examines Bradstreet's empire and fire imagery as examples of Bradstreet's broad desire but particularly her desire for political power and gender equality.[2] Giffen examines feminist readings of Bradstreet more critically than her contemporaries, attempting to subvert the ongoing scholarly binary between reading Bradstreet as a devout Puritan or as a rebellious feminist. Giffen's project effectively articulates this scholarly binary yet her study relies heavily on the feminist scholarly tradition. Further, Giffen uses religion to explain Bradstreet's relationship to her world's gendered discourses. As I consider the contemporary scholarly landscape and

[2]Importantly, Schwartz's reading relies heavily on imagery in Bradstreet's poetry, particularly of empires and fire. Schwartz therefore celebrates Bradstreet as a poet throughout her essay and reads her poetry as an act of resistance. Schwartz therefore exists as a modern example of taking Bradstreet seriously as a poet but her focus on grounding her essay in historical context and feminist theory justifies considering Schwartz alongside scholars who examine Bradstreet's background through a feminist lens.

discourse surrounding Bradstreet, evocative and innovative work takes up Bradstreet as a feminist. However, contemporary scholarship has shifted away from Bradstreet's religious lens.

Since the late nineteenth century when Emily Dickinson's first collection of poems was published, Dickinson's poetry has remained a topic of ongoing scholarly interest. Dickinson remains a well-studied poet, both for her biography and for her poetic and literary excellence. Early scholars paid particular attention to Dickinson's seemingly reclusive lifestyle. Charles R. Anderson (1960) explicitly considers Dickinson a private poet and in his section, "The Inner World," explains that Dickinson found both poetic and existential meaning in her solitude. Late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century scholars have turned away from perceptions of Dickinson as a hermit, increasingly reading her biography through feminist and queer lenses and interpreting her retraction from society as a radical rejection of nineteenth-century gender norms. Wendy Martin (1985) understands Dickinson through a developing feminist lens, highlighting the importance of Dickinson's female friendships on her life and work (82). Scholar and feminist critic Betsy Erkkila (1985) writes similarly that Dickinson's seclusion defined Dickinson's unique "struggle to create a female life not yet imagined by the culture in which she lived" (103). Recent scholars have continued Erkkila and Martin's project as they apply contemporary values onto interpreting Dickinson. Marianne Noble (2021) summarizes contemporary scholarly and cultural interest in Dickinson suggesting that modern readers particularly value the "feminism, queerness, and open-endedness" they find in Dickinson (284). According to Noble, many notable authors and scholars including Virginia Jackson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath have read Dickinson through a feminist lens and scholarly queer readings of Dickinson trace back to Rebecca Patterson's 1954 *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, (298, 285). Contemporary readings of Dickinson's poetry as feminist and queer perpetuate biographical investigation of Dickinson.

Present and past scholarship also explores Dickinson's literary merit as a poet. Twentieth-century scholar Christanne Miller (1987) addresses Dickinson's linguistic and formal choices in her works. Miller particularly celebrates how Dickinson's complex use of language, including metaphor and simile and irregular punctuation and syntax, invites a "multiplicity" of meaning for the reader (Miller 2). Many recent projects have also undertaken analyzing Dickinson's form and structure. Virginia Jackson (2005) reinterprets Dickinson by challenging editorial history and reception history as she considers the symbiotic relationship between defining lyric reading and defining Dickinson's poetry. Jackson investigates how lyric reading influences our understandings of Dickinson's work and suggests that considering Dickinson a poet is both a product of and a contributing factor in modern understandings of poetic genre. While Dickinson's form and poetic language has generated broad scholarly interest, specialized focus on Dickinson's religious context and spiritual negotiations remains rich. Victoria Morgan, in her book *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture: Tradition and Experience* (2010), considers how religious influence, particularly hymn culture, impacts Dickinson's work in form and structure, alongside content and ideas. Though Morgan does not seek to classify Dickinson's poems as hymns, her investigation does position Dickinson's poetry, both in content and form, within the context of hymns and, therefore, reflects ongoing scholarly work to understand Dickinson's poetry alongside accepted hymn form.

Considering religious content, Dickinson's presentation of spirituality reflects an ongoing scholarly dichotomy. Some scholars, including Martin, read Dickinson as rejecting Christianity, while others, including Roger Lundin, read Dickinson's poetry as part of the ongoing "dramatic transformation" of Christianity in the Connecticut River Valley from strictly Calvinist Puritanism to a culture of "Whig republicanism" and "evangelical moralism" during Dickinson's lifetime

("The Tender Pioneer" 150). Lundin, a long-time Professor at the Evangelical Christian Wheaton College in Illinois, explored Dickinson throughout his career from a theologically informed perspective, both in his literary analysis, as in "The Tender Pioneer in the Prairies of the Air: Dickinson and the Differences of God," and in his biography, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, which was published in 1998 as a part of the "Library of Religious Biography" series (Baumgaertner). However, most scholars, including Morgan and Clark W. Gilpin (2014), acknowledge that Dickinson's poetry is richly spiritual, especially considering her Christian upbringing and continuous engagement with Biblical imagery and themes, and recognize her aversion towards Christianity, specifically her refusal to join Amherst's First Congregational Church and limited engagement with formal religious practices as an adult. Strong scholarship, both contemporary and historical, has focused on Emily Dickinson's spiritual and religious life and considered how her poetic and literary skill contribute to and derive from these themes.

Upon reflecting on the vast body of scholarship examining both Bradstreet and Dickinson's work, it is compelling to consider their poetry in conversation. In each poet's work, there is a strong thread of internal discovery and individual contemplation that connects the ways in which Bradstreet and Dickinson develop their thinking about and expression of faith. Focus limited to Dickinson provides useful insight into her power as a poet and personal context. Exploring Dickinson in conversation with Bradstreet, however, highlights Dickinson's unique cultural and religious context and strengthens our understanding of Dickinson's revered place in the wider American literary canon. Similarly, drawing parallels while close reading Bradstreet and Dickinson together strengthens our understanding Bradstreet's religious imagery in her poetry and helps define her as a remarkable and timeless artist.

**Dickinson: Hymn Culture, Church Culture, and Religious Doubt**

Throughout her poetry, Emily Dickinson uses religious themes and imagery particularly through the strong voices of her speakers. Dickinson, who lived her whole life in New England, was heavily influenced by local religious attitudes, specifically those perpetuated by the Congregational Church. The Congregational Church, which grew out of Bradstreet's Puritan tradition, believes deeply in the power of "the Word of God as each person interprets" it ("About Congregationalism"). Congregationalism's emphasis on personal conviction and spiritual discovery partly explains Dickinson's poetic style, which is heavily sensory and highly personal to each poem's speaker. Reading her poetry when informed by the Congregational worldview illuminates Dickinson's ongoing theological thinking and her poetic call for the religious and the spiritual to recenter the lived experience rather than restrict focus to one's destination after death. While Dickinson's poems are deeply internal and reflective, it remains important to distinguish Dickinson from the feelings and thoughts of her poem's speakers, who are often imagined characters. Some of her speakers are dead, as in canonized poems "I heard a Fly buzz -when I died" and "Because I could not stop for Death"; these poems tell of imagined experiences separate and distinct from Dickinson's lived realities. Other poems read as more plausible memories, including "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", but Dickinson's distance from reality and creative stylizations remain key to understanding her poetry. Dickinson uses poetry not as a template for narrative personal reflection but as her artistic exploration of many varied topics, including but not limited to personal spirituality.

Dickinson's poetry reveals deep emotions, personal experiences (both imagined and lived), and vivid sensory details. Dickinson's focus on an individual voice connects to her religious ponderings made explicit in some of her poems, including "[I've heard an Organ talk,

sometimes -]", and "["Faith" is a fine invention]" and implicit in many others. Dickinson explores Christianity, God, faith, and the afterlife through the personal and emotional. Dickinson's poetry presents complicated ponderings on both religion and spirituality, often drawing a distinction between an individual experience of faith or faithful transformation and the structural beliefs of the Church. Through her poetry, Dickinson both makes use of and takes issue with Congregational belief systems and structures, and yet, her poetry continually engages in questions of personal piety and the meaning of God and religion in her own everyday life, highlighting Dickinson's poetry as a spiritual or theological project that rejects structures of belief but not the presence or power of God.

Formally, Dickinson uses hymn meter in many of her poems. Hymn meter, also known as the fourteener, is a poetic form composed of fourteen syllables in iambic pentameter. Typically, the rhyme scheme is ABAB (Hardison et al.). Dickinson often uses two fourteeners, each split into two lines. Dickinson loosely organizes her poetry around Christian Hymn form, intentionally breaking that form for thematic and rhetorical effect ("Emily Dickinson" 1249). Considering Dickinson's genre, many nineteenth-century Christians, particularly women, wrote hymns. Interestingly, standard hymns centralize the interplay between the hymn's lyricist and the "imagined or real" congregation while Dickinson's poetry strictly focuses on the internal (Morgan 4). Victoria Morgan effectively argues in her 2010 book, *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture: Tradition and Experience*, that Dickinson's poetic project can be read alongside hymns and understood as a lyrical process of explaining and discovering God. While Morgan draws comparison between hymn writing and Dickinson's poetry, Morgan clarifies that her purpose is not to "reclassify Dickinson's poems as hymns, but rather, to explore the ways in which her relation to hymnody can be seen as profoundly informing representation of spirituality in her

work" (5). The nineteenth-century hymn writing tradition shares structural and cultural similarities to Dickinson's poetry as both investigate spiritual themes and were written by women, but hymnody required strict adherence to formal structure and was composed with a broad audience (a church's congregation) in mind. Writing in free verse and often breaking hymn form rules together with refraining from widespread circulation of her work in her lifetime, Dickinson rejects the limitations of hymn in her poetry. Dickinson's poetic relationship to hymnody mirrors her relationship to Congregationalism. As with hymnody, Congregationalism impacts Dickinson's understanding of religion and influences the ways she approaches spiritual language in her poetry. Established and organized Christian culture strongly affect Dickinson's spiritual thinking and, yet, her poetic voice remains distinct from these religious influences.

In her poem, "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]," Dickinson explores the transformational power of religious music in her poetry by detailing the speaker's experience of hearing organ music and mysteriously transforming into a more religious version of herself. Dickinson begins, "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes – / And understood no word it said -" (1). The poet personifies the organ, as the organ itself speaks to her. While this opening suggests that the poem will explain what the organ says or has said, Dickinson's poem instead focuses on the effect of the organ on the speaker. Rather than highlighting the communal power of organ music, Dickinson focuses on the individual experience of the speaker hearing the organ music. Dickinson writes "And understood no word it said -," clarifying with both the grammar of the first two lines and the content of the poem as a whole that the speaker is the subject of her poem (3). As subject, "I" performs the action, which is listening and transforming. De-emphasizing the organ's music-making, effect on the listener shown through Dickinson's grammatical structuring alludes to her ongoing focus on the speaker. In centering the sensory experience of listening to

the organ, the poet suggests that the organ is a device for understanding herself. Unlike with hymnody, "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" focuses on an individual rather than a unified congregation. Sensory experiences are a device Dickinson uses for self-discovery, and in her opening line here, she asserts that hearing the organ sparks change in her speaker. By merit of the genre itself, hymns center music-making from both the congregation and the organ that accompanies them. Unlike hymn lyricists who engage in sacred music by perpetuating the tradition for the congregation, Dickinson uses sacred music to portray personal discovery in her poem. Using religious music as a structural device, Dickinson challenges the communal power of participating in hymnody and, by centering her speaker's individual experience rather than the communal experience of hymn singing, presents a more individualized practice of faith.

In "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", capitalization highlights the singularity of the speaker's self-discovery and serves further to distinguish her experiential voice in the poem. Dickinson treats the "Organ" as a proper noun. Dickinson's use of capitalization in the first line, "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes," reinforces the "Organ['s]" individual and specific power to "talk" to, meaning influence, the speaker. Treating "Organ" as a proper noun distinguishes the organ and the speaker's experience of the organ from general religious musical experiences. Dickinson again challenges hymn culture, which is so focused on communal musical experiences, by individualizing the musical effect of the organ on her speaker. Dickinson's capitalization continues in the second line of the poem, "In a Cathedral Aisle," (2). Again, Dickinson's break from expected grammar serves to individualize, distinguishing the church setting in order to stage the personal transformation she explains in her following lines.

Dickinson's other uses of capitalization in this poem further reflect her desire to individualize the speaker. In the poem's second stanza, the speaker "rise[s] up" and leaves the

church, transformed by the Organ's "speech" into "A more Bernardine Girl," (6). Writing "Bernardine Girl," Dickinson refers to St. Bernard of Clairvaux's monastic order and suggests that her speaker becomes more like a Cistercian nun ("Bernardine").[3] Invoking Catholic monastic tradition, Dickinson both illustrates her speaker becoming devoutly religious and alludes to the strict structure of the Catholic Church. Rather than just becoming more pious, Dickinson's speaker becomes more ingrained in the institutional church. Dickinson, therefore, clarifies that this transformation is particularly religious and institutionally Christian rather than spiritual. Dickinson draws an important distinction between religion and spirituality, a distinction she continues to mark in her larger body of poetic work. Dickinson makes the speaker's transformation individual through her distinct syntax and reinforces the specificity of her spiritual transformation by treating the "Bernadine Girl," particularly the "Girl" (because "Bernardine" grammatically requires capitalization) as a proper noun. By treating common nouns as proper nouns, Dickinson highlights her speaker's unique and personal religious experience in "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", providing insight into Dickinson's own personal experience with religion. Dickinson's structural emphasis on individualizing through capitalization in this poem reflects her continual defining and redefining of spirituality for herself outside of traditional Christian institutions.

Dickinson's form in "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" similarly highlights the influence of religious music on transformation in the poem. Dickinson engages with hymnody, both in utilizing hymn meter and by engaging with religious musical culture "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]." Dickinson writes the poem in a recognizable hymn meter, separating

[3]It is important to note that in the *Journal of Singing* edition of "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes," Dickinson is quoted writing "Berdardine" rather than "Bernardine," as is listed in the Belknap Press edition. Editor R. W. Franklin likely interpreted "Berdardine" as a spelling mistake, which aligns with the meanings for the poem suggested by "Bernardine."

the poem into two stanzas, each containing two fourteeners split into two lines, and using an ABCB rhyme scheme throughout. While Dickinson adheres to hymn meter form throughout the poem, she does break from the rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter in the second stanza, writing,

> And risen up – and gone away,
> A more Bernardine Girl –
> Yet – knew not what was done to me
> In that old Chapel Aisle. (5–8).

While readers expect the poem's sixth line to follow the ABCB rhyme scheme and the iambic and syllabic rhythm she employs throughout the poem, the poet instead writes, "A more Bernardine Girl" (6). Breaking from her establish form, Dickinson distinguishes and emphasizes this line. By isolating "A more Bernardine Girl," Dickinson highlights the transformation of the speaker. Dickinson creates a sharp contrast between "A more Bernardine Girl" and the rest of the poem, emphasizing the impact of the religious transformation on the speaker. Removing this line from the rhythm of the poem transforms the form of "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" making the transformation of this moment twofold. Dickinson's decision to utilize and break from hymn meter here evokes the religious power of a musically unified congregation. Breaking from hymn meter takes the poem out of religious conformity, further highlighting the individual transformation Dickinson's speaker experience. The organ of this poem is seemingly responsible for the speaker's religious transformation. Dickinson's engagement with hymn meter and hymn culture overlaps with music's motivic effect in "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]". Dickinson acknowledges music's transformative religious power in this poem while challenging the institutionalized use of music, particularly hymn music, breaking from hymn meter and suggesting that music's strongest impact is individual rather than communal.

"[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", poignantly tells of Dickinson's struggle to comprehend understand religion and define her relationship with God. By featuring human confusion in this poetic story of spiritual transformation, Dickinson employs the Congregational ethos of relying on one's personal message from and relationship to God and highlights doubt's role in the individual spiritual journey. In the first stanza of "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson writes that she "understood no word it said - / Yet held [her] breath, the while -" and later, "knew not what was done to [her]" (3–4, 7). Dickinson's most vivid physical descriptions of feeling express confusion. Confusion implies doubt that God or Church controlled her transformation into a more "Bernadine Girl." As the poem suggests in the opening lines, the speaker questions if the Organ, meaning music itself, transformed her, rather than divine intervention. The poet cannot explain the Organ's power or her internal transformation. The organ's "talk," meaning its musical production, transforms the speaker and suggests that for the poet, as is the case for many, music has a distinctly transformative power. Writing "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" in such individualistic terms and focusing solely on organ music (rather than a complete Church service or the word of Church leaders), Dickinson attempts to demystify the speaker's transformation. The poet doubts God's presence in the Church as she describes the effect of the organ music on the speaker. Doubting, particularly doubting God's existence or His power over humanity and the living, might seem like Dickinson's rejection of Christianity and concomitant striving instead for the agnostic or atheist life. Instead, doubt is central to Dickinson's project of spiritual self-discovery. As Dickinson makes space for doubt in her narration of religious transformation, her break from hymn meter enhances her rejection of the strict confidence institutional religion upholds. There is little room for doubt in hymn music, which calls on the entire congregation to worship in unison and in agreement. But for Dickinson,

while music initiates the transformation that centers "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", doubt and mystery are essential to this poem and to the religious experience it details.

Transformation provides another lens for reading "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]". For Dickinson, spiritual doubt and meaningful religious transformation are not mutually exclusive but instead work together to create the whole religious experience. Interestingly, while organ music seems to transform the speaker, the music's emotional power is not Dickinson's emotional focus. While one may speculate about the color and mood of the organ's sacred song, Dickinson does not describe the actual music. Instead, Dickinson writes that she "understood no word it said" (3). What matters to Dickinson is not the music itself but instead its role in transforming the speaker and creating her confusion. Music serves not to control emotional transformation but to construct a religious atmosphere in which faith, growth, and doubt cohabitate. In "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson attempts to explain the speaker's transformation, seemingly crediting music itself. However, in highlighting not the music itself but the speaker's personal confusion, Dickinson evokes a mystical and unexplainable experience which suggests divine intervention. Though Congregational theology asks worshipers to convey their personal experience of God's word to their church, Christianity also believes in God's omnipotence and existence beyond comprehension. In "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", the poet's reflection fails to explain the speaker's transformation into a more "Bernadine," or nun-like, girl (6). Considering the poem as part of Dickinson's project of spiritual discovery, "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", serves the Puritan ideal of exploring God's word personally while pushing forward this exploration and highlighting how doubt factors into individual religious understanding. While "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" includes spiritual confusion, the poem shows Dickinson's poetic expression of

faith as more mature, complex, and nuanced than the obedient compliant practice she was taught as a girl in the Congregational Church, pointing ultimately towards her belief in divine intervention and a Christian God.

Dickinson's short poem, "["Faith" is a fine invention]" contrasts with "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", focusing on religious doubt. Dickinson writes,

> "Faith" is a fine invention
> For Gentlemen who *see!*
> But Microscopes are prudent
> In an Emergency! (1–4)

In the poem's first line, Dickinson writes that "faith" is an "invention," rather than an inherent truth. Dickinson's adept punctuation and grammatical choices highlight her point. Placing "Faith" within quotation marks that "Faith" is not the poet's word. Dickinson thereby creates distance from the perspective of "Faith." Considering Dickinson's complex personal relationship with Christianity and her lived experience in church, the "Faith" she describes here is the Christian faith she has resisted in her personal life. Dickinson's distancing quotation suggests the poet quotes Christian believers and separates the speaker from the perspective of an obedient believer. Placing "Faith" in quotations also suggests that this "faith" is announced and professed publicly by others because the poet quotes them. Hence, Dickinson considers public and communal worship essential to the institutional Christian church that she grew up in.

As in "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson individualizes faith and spirituality in "["Faith" is a fine invention]". Dickinson seemingly denounces religion and God for herself but agrees that "faith" is still "fine," benefitting those who believe wholeheartedly. The poet's quoted "Faith" seems to emerge from the Gentlemen she introduces in her next line. Dickinson continues, writing that faith works, "For Gentlemen who *see*!" (2). As with placing

"Faith" in quotations, italicizing "*see"* separates seeing from the speaker's experience and reality. Because the italics set apart "*see*" from the rest of the poem, the different typeset word encourages readers to question *"see"* and the religious clarity believers proclaim. Similarly, italicizing "*see*" illustrates the speaker's doubt because she stylistically distinguishes this seeing from the rest of the poem, and accordingly, from the real sight of microscopes Dickinson introduces in the poem's second half.

Writing "Gentlemen," Dickinson suggests that gender contributes to the separation between her speaker and the faithful. Further, "Gentlemen" implies class privilege. The poet, therefore, associates faith and religious compliance with societally advantaged men. "["Faith" is a fine invention]" questions the power structure of the church by associating "Faith" with "Gentlemen". Because Dickinson's directs her challenge of faith at "Gentlemen" as the specific named believers, she complicates the speaker's rejection of faith. Contextualizing "Faith" as the faith of "Gentlemen who *see,*" limits the speaker's rejection to faith that is declared and pertains to powerful gentlemen. Dickinson's punctuation and gendered language makes her rejection of faith here more subtle and nuanced, suggesting this rejection has more to do with man-made religious structures rather than the concept of God itself.

Dickinson's use of quotations and italics enhances the ironic tone of "["Faith" is a fine invention]". In the second half of the poem, by using quotations and italics, Dickinson takes the poem outside of the speaker's voice. The poet writes, "But Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency," validating another version of seeing, scientific and empirical sight (3–4). In her comparison, Dickinson's speaker juxtaposes the "prudent," meaning well-judged and cautiously considered, observational sight with the spiritual "sight" of the faithful ("Prudent"). This dichotomy illustrates the poet's questioning of and doubt about spiritual seeing's validity. The

shift in the second half of "["Faith" is a fine invention]" into scientific sight best illustrates the ironic tone she employs throughout her poem. Drawing a comparison between the scientific sight of a microscope and the religious "sight" of "Gentlemen," Dickinson's speaker suggests an ironic understanding of religious belief. Further, presenting two short couplets rather than an extended form keeps Dickinson's poem simple and playful, rather than elaborating further in an extended poetic exploration of faith which Dickinson does in many of her other poems. Placing "'faith'" in quotations and "*see*" in italics is also notably ironic as these linguistic conventions not only quote another voice but also distinguish and modify the tone of the "Gentlemen." Dickinson's speaker therefore pokes fun at the faith she references in her poem and more broadly mock's the rhetoric of male church leaders, who share the same professed belief and societal status as the "Gentlemen." While religious believers claim to see all through their faith, Dickinson playfully resists, noting that this spiritual "sight" is useless against the physical, tangible world we actually see around us.

Dickinson's speaker asserts that scientific sight and tangible investigation of the physical world are urgent needs as she writes, "But Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency," (3–4). Because microscopes make possible scientific investigations of minute and infinitesimal matter otherwise not visible, the poet suggests that this kind of sight and investigation of the physical world is required now that it is possible as she evokes the urgency of an "Emergency." Additionally, by contrasting the microscopic sight from religious vision, the poet suggests that faith limits believer's views, causing them to ignore important happenings in the human world as they instead focus on piety and afterlife. As Dickinson's speaker rejects Godly "sight" in favor of worldly understanding, it is possible to read Dickinson as critiquing the Puritan focus on heaven and asking for focus, whether spiritual or secular, on the physical world. This reading, aided by

the poet's decision to clarify that the believers she ironically quotes are "Gentlemen" and the gendered and class-driven implications of this line when accepted as the speaker's questioning of the organized Church's power structure, present a version of "["Faith" is a fine invention]" that challenges the conventions of religion as upheld and professed by the organized Christian church. Alternatively, "["Faith" is a fine invention]" encapsulates only religious doubt. Even still, if we consider the important role of doubt in faith, expressing doubt in "["Faith" is a fine invention]" works to strengthen the spiritually informed conclusions Dickinson draws in other poems and reminds us that theological thinking and personal understanding of God and Christianity are an ongoing project in the lives of believers and doubters alike.

In both "["Faith" is a fine invention]" and "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson's poetry engages with spiritual mystery and questioning. "["Faith" is a fine invention]" presents a speaker outside of faith who doubt's Christianity, particularly institutionally. "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]" considers doubt is intertwined with religious transformation as the speaker becomes more Christian through a completely mystifying process perhaps involving God's unknowable power. Importantly, both of Dickinson's poems explored herein depict the complicated relationship between Dickinson and religion focusing particularly on the implications of structural religion and the institutional Christian Church on this relationship. Dickinson's poetic expressions of mystery, doubt, and institutional religion present poetry deeply engage in a critique of and fascination with organized religion, yet her work goes beyond to consider moments of divinity and spirituality specifically possible within each individual.

**Bradstreet: Human Relationships in the Physical World**

Born in 1612 in Northampton, England, Anne Bradstreet immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, accompanied by her husband, Simon Bradstreet, and parents Thomas and Dorothy Dudley. Bradstreet lived a pious Puritan life, deeply influenced by her father, the second governor of the Massachusetts colony, and her husband, who became governor after her death (Hensley xxiii–xxiv). Much like Dickinson, Bradstreet's Puritanism valued the individual experience of God's word and the Holy Spirit, encouraging Bradstreet to consider theological questions throughout her life. Bradstreet and her inner circle, Puritan elites in the early Massachusetts Bay Colony, were acutely poetic. Jeannine Hensley explains in her introductory essay, "Anne Bradstreet's Wreath of Thyme" that "versifying was, in fact, very common in colonial New England" (xxiv). In most of Bradstreet's poetry, particularly her early work, she uses verse to understand the classical teaching essential to her seventeenth-century education and to declare her faith and help her explain God's word. In some of Bradstreet's poetry, however, her poetic mission is vaguer, allowing scholars to interpret the arc of her work as the expression of a new feminist project while others read this poetry as Bradstreet's continuation a Puritan project that uses poetry to continue reaching conclusions about God's power and the promise of eternal life in Heaven. Most apparently in her poetry about relationships with her loved ones, Bradstreet questions God. In elegies to her dead grandchildren, mourning leads Bradstreet to question God's decision-making, believing these children were taken too early from the world. In poems about her husband, Bradstreet expresses deep worldly love, finding passion in her life with him on earth rather than leaning on the promise of heaven. Still, Bradstreet's questioning consistently return to God's message, reminding us that Bradstreet's poetry emanates from strong piety. Bradstreet's questions recall Dickinson's,

suggesting Bradstreet's resistance to strict Puritan values more than a resistance to divinity or Christianity at its core.

Bradstreet's "To My Dear and Loving Husband" reflects what scholarly critics have described as a tension between being rebellious and dogmatic (Giffen 1). Is Bradstreet's dedication to her husband as reflected in this poem a worldly rebellion as she expresses deep, even physical desire, or is her poem a reasoned reflection of a devoted Puritan wife working to achieve what Richardson calls the Puritan ideal, "that one must somehow live in the world without being of it" (317)? Bradstreet's opening is vivid, loving, and physical. She writes,

> 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 woman, if you can. (1–4)

Bradstreet's opening demonstrates a deep worldly and physical love for her husband. Bradstreet specifically notes their union, for the two are "surely" together as "one", and unique love (1). With her first line, "If ever two were one, then surely we," Bradstreet alludes to sexual love as she and her husband physically become one (1). Bradstreet's tone is praiseworthy and positive, affirming her deep, grateful love and desire for her husband. Asking readers to "compare" their love with hers further sets apart Bradstreet's marriage as unique and exemplary (4). Bradstreet boasts her marriage and connection with her husband, professing not her spiritual superiority but her worldly love. As Bradstreet centers her role as a wife, Bradstreet seems to choose her husband rather than choosing God. Writing "if ever wife was happy in a man," Bradstreet declares that her husband is the source of her happiness (3). While Bradstreet's poetry tends to avoid emotional confessions and overt expressivity, revealing that with her husband she is happy, and particularly is happier than every other woman, Bradstreet centralizes and emphasizes the emotional power of her human and physical marriage. Her passionate marital unity stands

beside, and perhaps even above, her Godly devotion. Bradstreet celebrates her marriage and writes that their love "is such that rivers cannot quench" and matters "more than whole mines of gold" (6–8). Lauding marriage above the world's greatest pleasures effectively situates her marital love alongside devotion to God.

While Bradstreet dedicates most of "To My Dear and Loving Husband" to describing her marriage, she introduces Christian heaven in the final lines of her poem. Bradstreet writes, "The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray. / Then while we live, in love let's so persevere / That when we live no more, we may live ever." (10–12). Beginning her explicit inclusion of God, Bradstreet prays for her husband and her eternal life. Puritanism's belief in predestination meant only a chosen few would reach heaven in the afterlife. Throughout her poem, Bradstreet assuredly praises her husband and flaunts their exceptional love to her readers. Yet, her prayer that "heaven to reward thee manifold" reflects want. Bradstreet cannot boast a guaranteed afterlife and can only pray in hope that she and her husband will reach heaven together. Bradstreet's attitude towards God and the afterlife are markedly less confident than her descriptions of her husband and their worldly love. Expressing more confidence in her marriage than in her God presents a version of Bradstreet that has decentered religion and aligns with reading the poet as a rebel. Alternatively, Bradstreet's prayer expresses her desire to uphold Christian values and celebrate the mystery and omnipotence of God.

While Bradstreet has all she can desire from the human world through her marriage, she wants more which can only come from her God. Bradstreet's introduction of heaven and afterlife in the poem presents a new version of desire: desire to meet her maker in heaven. Praying that the "heavens reward thee manifold," Bradstreet demonstrates her desire for her husband to be one of the chosen believers (10). While Bradstreet's ending illustrates her prioritization of

marital love, Bradstreet also shows that her heavenly desires extend beyond her husband and to herself. Bradstreet extends hope for eternal life to herself in her final line as she expresses her desire to "live ever" with her husband (12). Bradstreet writes that she plans for her marital relationship to "persevere" so that when she and her husband die, they "may live ever," meaning go together to heaven (11–12). Bradstreet asserts that she can find everlasting life in her love for her husband as her prayer to reach heaven is intertwined with her desire for her husband's eternal life. Bradstreet suggests that having a loving marriage and devoting herself to being a wife reflect Christian values, which will ensure her place in the Puritan promise of heaven and eternal life with God. In "To My Dear and Loving Husband," Bradstreet uses her exploration of passionate love for her husband to reach the ultimate eternal love, God. Through her relationship with her husband, Bradstreet finds an intense passion that does not pull her away from God but instead reinforces her heavenly desires.

Bradstreet's poem presents an intersection between Earthly desire and Godly desire, suggesting that Bradstreet makes personal meaning of Puritan teachings by finding God in the human world. However, Bradstreet's vivid and passionate language does not reflect traditional Puritan rigidity. Interestingly, "To My Dear and Loving Husband" was not published in Bradstreet's original collection, suggesting that this poem in particular may have reflected unwanted thoughts and desires, particularly from a woman living in the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony. This poem was one Bradstreet kept private during her life perhaps because it so personally reflected love meant for her husband. Bradstreet's "To My Dear and Loving Husband" introduces subversive religious thinking in her poetry. While the poem concludes with Bradstreet's prayer for heavenly and Godly acceptance, her focus on her human relationship with her husband and vivid depictions of their love in the world push against the

Puritan focus on the afterlife. As Bradstreet's poem, situated firmly in the human experience, pushes towards God in the end, Bradstreet presents a version of belief that celebrates worldly and human experiences and perhaps recenters God, allowing believers to find passion for Him in their lived experiences rather than reserving love and desire for anticipating God and their spiritual afterlives.

**Bradstreet and Dickinson's Divine Nature**

Anne Bradstreet's introduction of a more human and worldly religious journey as she desires heaven alongside her ongoing desire for her husband in their marriage presents a poet deeply engaged with religious practice. Similarly, Dickinson's poetry of religious doubt and transformation asks questions of what believing means. While both poets present captivating understandings of faith and questioning religion, Bradstreet and Dickinson parallel each other in their poetic engagement with nature as a spiritual force. Both writers continue poetically to consider and negotiate with the strict religious practices of their communities, particularly as they each examine the natural world. Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson's natural imagery similarly demonstrates respect and reverence for the natural world. Seasonal imagery, bird imagery, motifs of light, and questions of temporality flood their work, expounding on the beauty of New England's landscape and the powerful impact of nature on human spirituality. While some interpret Bradstreet's and Dickinson's emphasis on nature, particularly nature as a spiritual experience, as a rejection of Christianity, I see their vivid natural imagery as integral to Bradstreet's and Dickinson's poetic search for the divine on Earth. Though Puritan tradition encourages believers to focus only on God's promises of Heaven, Genesis introduces God as the Creator and the author of all Earth's natural delights. Nature embodies rather than rejects religion

and reflects a shared project between Bradstreet and Dickinson: recentering earthly life and finding God in their human experiences of the natural world.

Anne Bradstreet's poem "Contemplations" provides helpful insights into her theological and spiritual thinking expressed in her poetic descriptions of nature. "Contemplations" is Bradstreet's thirty-three stanza consideration of the living world and the afterlife with particular focus on nature and God's power within it. Many scholars have analyzed Bradstreet's poetic work in "Contemplations." Adrienne Rich writes that "Contemplations" is Bradstreet's "most skilled and appealing of her long poems" and praises Bradstreet's vivid American landscape imagery in the poem (Rich xviii). In his essay, "The Puritan Poetry of Anne Bradstreet," Robert Richardson lauds "Contemplations" as Bradstreet's best poetry. He particularly celebrates her thematic "concern with time and mutability," compelling nature symbolism, and stylistic reference to Shakespeare (323). Throughout her poetry, Bradstreet showcases Shakespearean style and inspiration, particularly in form as she employs iambic pentameter, traditional rhyme schemes, and the sonnet, so it is unsurprising to notice Shakespeare's influence in "Contemplations." Further, Richardson's celebration reflects his interpretation of Bradstreet's theological project in "Contemplations," which Richardson reads as her "most successful expression of the Puritan ideal of living fully within the world without being of it" (324). While Richardson's reading of Bradstreet's natural imagery, particularly in the poems opening stanzas, is interesting evidence, I think he fails to consider Bradstreet's imagery outside of the Puritan context and provides an oversimplified religious reading, one that requires Bradstreet's project to be fittingly Puritan in order to be theological.

I found in *Contemplations* Anne Bradstreet's most interesting poetic negotiations with her spirituality. Bradstreet's opening lines introduce two themes (temporality and the sun as spiritual)

that are particularly representative of Bradstreet's complicated poetic relationship towards religion in "Contemplations." Bradstreet writes,

> Some time now past in the autumnal tide,
> When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,
> The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
> Where gilded o'er by his rich golden head. (1–4)

As Bradstreet begins her poem, she introduces the complicated relationship with time that she presents in "Contemplations." Writing, "some time now past in the autumnal tide, / When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed," Bradstreet creates layers of temporality (1–4). Evoking the past, "Contemplations" is immediately reflective. Bradstreet harkens back to a memory of autumn, a sunset past, "when" Phoebus was nearly asleep. Phoebus, or Apollo as the god of the sun, personifies the sun and as he heads toward sleep, so too does the sun, expressing a concrete understanding of the natural day, which ends when the sun sets ("Phoebus"). Bradstreet sets her poem at dusk, evoking a specific sense of temporality that the reader immediately identifies with. Her vivid description of colorful fall foliage illuminated by "golden" sunlight places "Contemplations" in fall. In her opening lines, Bradstreet establishes clear "Contemplations" as a reflection of a past autumn sunset. However, later in "Contemplations," Bradstreet complicates notions of temporality and layers timelines.

Later in "Contemplations," Bradstreet quotes herself, introducing the present tense in those quotations. Throughout "Contemplations," Bradstreet continues to reflect on nature. Specifically, in the middle of the poem, Bradstreet begins to contemplate the birds she sees and hears. Having described the sounds of sweet birdsongs, Bradstreet quotes herself. She writes,

> "'O merry Bird,' said I, 'that fears no snares,
> That neither toils nor hoards up in thy barn,
> Feels no sad thoughts nor cruciating cares
> To gain more good or shun what might thee harm.
> Thy clothes ne'er wear, thy meat is everywhere,

Thy bed a bough, thy drink the water clear,
Reminds not what is past, nor what's to come dost fear." (184–190)

Quoting her past self has various temporal and spiritual effects. Bradstreet introduces a present tense timeline. Her extended quote is situated in the moment of autumnal dusk that she reflects on in her opening stanza. Separating her verbal response to the moment creates an interesting juxtaposition between Bradstreet's immediate reaction to the natural experience she felt at sunset and her later reflection, these separate responses in time a key theme throughout "Contemplations." Returning to her opening, Bradstreet is moved by the vibrant fall colors and light of dusk. As she continues her reflection, "Contemplations" remains fairly well-grounded in her Puritan background and, overall, refrains from questioning her own place in God's kingdom. Bradstreet aligns her celebrations of nature with God's omnipotent legacy in His created natural world. Following her opening stanza, Bradstreet immediately celebrates the Christian God. Bradstreet writes, "If so much excellence abide below, / How excellent is He that dwells on high" (10–11). Bradstreet frames her natural images within the lens of God's creative power. Later in "Contemplations", she similarly celebrates the sun through the same lens of Puritan worship. Bradstreet writes, "How full of glory then must thy Creator be, / Who gave this bright light luster unto thee?" (48–49). "Contemplations" celebrates and glorifies the natural world while directing glory to God and the heavenly afterlife.

Moreover, Bradstreet includes in "Contemplations" long reflections on *Genesis*, contextualizing humanities' role and purpose on earth and goal of reaching heaven. The middle of "Contemplations" features Bradstreet's retelling of the Cain and Abel story, in which Cain kills his brother Abel because he is jealous of Abel's success as a shepherd, and her recollection of Eve's original sin in the Garden of Eden (*The Bible,* Genesis 4:1–16). Bradstreet retells these foundational Biblical stories, grounding "Contemplations" in Christian context and highlighting

the universal human experience, particularly human sin. Bradstreet uses these stories to confirm the sinful nature of life on earth, urging herself and readers to look towards the perfection of the promised heavenly afterlife. Bradstreet concludes her recollection of the Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel stories writing, "Living so little while we are alive; / In eating, drinking, sleeping, vain delight /…puts all pleasures vain unto eternal flight" (117–120). Bradstreet focus on "eternal flight," effectively explains to her reader how, by utilizing Biblical context, one can understand why her meditation on nature's beauty as redirects to her desire for heaven in this poem.

While Bradstreet's overall focus in "Contemplations" is divine celebration, both manifested in nature and as promised in heaven, returning to her quotation, Bradstreet acknowledges her doubt of purpose in this extended quotation. As Bradstreet writes about the life of the bird, free from "toils," sadness, and fears about what is to come, her present tense quotation reflects deep doubt and questioning not just of Puritan teachings but of life's purpose (185). Bradstreet's jealousy for the bird's simpler life and expression of fear about her afterlife sharply challenge Puritan and Christian doctrine. Touting her desire to live the bird's life reflects Bradstreet dissatisfaction with aspects of her own life. Bradstreet's questioning of purpose as she writes about the beautiful simplicity of the bird's life resists to an extent her religious work, particularly her descriptions of *Genesis*. Nonetheless, Bradstreet importantly frames her doubt within quotations and more specifically a restricts her doubt to the past. Bradstreet both grammatically and temporally separates this huge moment of doubt from the rest of the poem, undermining her questioning of God. "Contemplations" presents as a spiritual reflection, one in which Bradstreet's moment of doubt is completely overcome through her poetic processing of her past natural interpretation.

Additionally, Bradstreet in this section of "Contemplations" raises questions about the temporality of spirituality. Is Bradstreet's natural connection to the divine dependent on time and place? Contrasting Bradstreet's reflective celebration of God and her present questioning, contained within quotation marks, highlights doubt's role in the religious experience. In some ways, Bradstreet's doubt aligns with the Puritan project of continual work to internalize one's divine destination while living an obedient life on earth. Alternately, Bradstreet suggests a new process of experiencing spirituality which centers and values doubt because she focuses on a natural and spiritual memory that, when fully realized, centered complete questioning of her purpose.

Returning to Bradstreet's opening stanza of "Contemplations," Bradstreet introduces her ongoing focus on the power of the spiritual sun. Bradstreet personify the sun, writing that the leafy fall trees were "gilded o'er by his rich golden head" (4). Throughout "Contemplations" Bradstreet highlights the sun's protective power over nature below. Bradstreet associates the sun with God, power above, control over nature, and unexplainable strength and beauty. As the sun gleams over the trees in the poem's opening stanza, Bradstreet implies that God watches over the world below, coloring the world with his light and protection. Bradstreet calls the sun as it shines down on the trees, enveloping them in "golden" light, a bountiful gift for the natural world below. Bradstreet associates the sun with vibrant riches, evoking the connection she draws between her husband's love and the world's "riches" in "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (7).

Bradstreet expands this description of the world around her, emphasizing the vivid colors of the trees that the sun illuminates. Bradstreet writes,

> The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
> Where gilded o'er by his rich golden head.
> Their leaves and fruits seemed painted, but was true,
> Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hue (3–6)

In the light of the sunset, the "mixed hue" of the autumn trees strikes Bradstreet, who continues, "Rapt were my senses at this delectable view" (7). Bradstreet's description of her reaction to the beautiful nature she details is her most personal, emotional, and provocative line in the first stanza. By including sensory details, Bradstreet renders her experience more personal and more vivid. Bradstreet's sensory reflection separates her perceptions of the natural world from her intellectual background or the doctrinal effect of Puritanism. Rather than highlighting teachings from her Puritan religious upbringing and community, Bradstreet describes her own feelings, describing her view as "delectable," which, interestingly, invokes taste and amplifies the sensory elements of her poem, inserting a playful quality. By inviting a playful and delightful experiential understanding of her poem, Bradstreet makes reading "Contemplations" more intimate and personal. Bradstreet subtly separates "Contemplations" from the Puritan way of life. Her personification of the sun and deification of the sun later in the poem emphasize the contrast between Bradstreet's personal reflection in "Contemplations" and the expectations and behaviors of the Puritan church.

Bradstreet's vibrant description of the sun in the first stanza predict her confrontation with the Sun's godlike power later in "Contemplations." In stanza 4, Bradstreet directly addresses the sun's God-like power. As Bradstreet gazes up at the "glistering" sun, she grows more and more "amazed," until "softly" she says, "What's glory like to thee? / Soul of this world, this universe's eye, No wonder some made thee a deity;" (23–28). From her vantage point, immersed in nature's beauty, Bradstreet looks to the sun and resigns to its power. Bradstreet's description of the sun is her most obvious poetic moment of religious questioning. While many of Bradstreet's other poems can be read through a feminist or subversive lens, those

same poems also reinforce Puritan standards of holy worship. In "Contemplations," as Bradstreet writes, "No wonder some made thee a deity" about the sun, directly questioning the Christian God she has been taught to believe in as she finds godliness in the sun. Importantly, here Bradstreet questions but does not doubt the existence nor power of God. Rather, she questions his form as she looks to the sun and contemplates her purpose as a living, thinking believer.

Bradstreet then quickly pivots back to Puritan teachings, writing, "Had I not better known, alas, the same had I" (29). Bradstreet's turn to Puritanism after her brief deification of the sun reflects how deeply ingrained her poetry is in the Puritan mindset. Writing "had I not better known," Bradstreet gratefully acknowledges her Puritan community because she suggests that Puritan teachings are spiritually and intellectually superior to pagan beliefs of the classical past. Considering this idea alongside her reflection on *Genesis*, Bradstreet's questioning does remain grounded in Christian foundations. Bradstreet ultimately acknowledges why some people worship the sun, admiring its strength and beauty but affirms her Christian beliefs and even claims that they are the superior and correct understanding of the world. Though Bradstreet rejects her wonderings about the sun's divinity, through "Contemplations" Bradstreet begins to understand the natural and earthly world as an extension and reflection of God's power. In this way, the sun becomes synonymous with God and his power within and over nature in Bradstreet's "Contemplations."

Bradstreet's celebration of the natural world, introduced in the first stanza of "Contemplations" and continuing throughout her poem, stands as a faithful challenge to Puritan limitations on one's connection to earthly life. In seeing the beauty of earthly nature with her poetic eye, Bradstreet presents her central question: How can the earthly world be this wonderful

and how can heaven be better? Bradstreet shifts her poetic language away from natural description and towards her desire to make meaning in the second stanza. Bradstreet writes,

> I wist not what to wish, yet sure thought I,
> If so much excellent abide below
> How excellent is He that dwells on high,
> Whose power and beauty by his works we know? (9–12)

Bradstreet's second stanza, though pointedly Christian and Puritan, includes hints of inquiry. Beginning, "I wist not what to wish," Bradstreet starts from a place of questioning. Not knowing what to "wish," Bradstreet suggests that her observations and feelings about nature do not immediately convey meaning. By using "wist" rather than know, Bradstreet employs an alliteration that emphasizes her first line ("Wist"). Because "wist" and "wish" sound so similar, Bradstreet creates aural and visual confusion for her readers, invoking the feeling of confusion she suggests in the meaning of this line. As Bradstreet continues, her shift towards the Christian God still contains confusion, yet this confusion moves away from questioning the source of nature's beauty and to more broad questioning about God. Bradstreet writes, "Whose power and beauty by his works we know?" (12). Punctuating this line with a question mark modifies Bradstreet's expression significantly, for she does not conclude that "we know" God's "power and beauty" but wonders if "we know?" Notably, Bradstreet does not question God's power or beauty itself, but whether "we" know it. The scope of her "we" might be understood as the scope of all humanity, highlighting God's power over the world and as visible in the natural world around her. The "we" might instead refer to Puritan limitations on perceiving God. Puritan focus on heaven and looking towards and beyond earthly life and worldliness limit finding God in the world. Considering Bradstreet's full line again, Bradstreet pushes against the idea that people cannot know God intimately while living on Earth.

As the poem continues, Bradstreet asserts God's visibility on Earth, suggesting that through her human sensory experience of nature we can come to know God more deeply. Bradstreet writes, "Sure he is goodness, wisdom, glory, light, / That hath this under world so richly dight; / More heaven than earth was here, no winter and no night" (13–15). Bradstreet's assertion that "more heaven than earth was here," refers the reader back to her original description of the golden autumnal sunset and colorful vibrant trees. Bradstreet finding God in nature and sharing her transformational insight is truly her project in "Contemplations."

Bradstreet's vision points towards Dickinson, who similarly finds spirituality in nature. In her poem "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", the poet asserts that she finds God in nature and rejects Christian structures in favor of a nature-based religious practice. Through employing bird imagery, religious language, and formal devices that invoke and subvert hymn form, Dickinson preaches a spiritual practice of finding God in nature. The poem begins by both explaining and rejecting institutional Christian worship:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
> I keep it, staying at Home –
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
> And an Orchard, for a Dome – (1–4)

Dickinson explains that while others go to church, she keeps the "Sabbath" by staying "Home." Terms "Sabbath" and "Church" introduce the poet's focus on religious ritual. Importantly, in describing "keep[ing] Sabbath" by "staying at Home," the speaker distances her sabbath ritual from the Church. It is interesting that Dickinson chose the word "Sabbath" to reflect her speaker's spiritual ritual because "sabbath" refers explicitly to the institutional Judeo-Christian day of religious observance and rest ("Sabbath"). The poet's direct use of the capitalized terms "Sabbath" and "Church" refers to organized religion which complicates purely secular readings of Dickinson's poetry. Some scholars read Dickinson's natural imagery as a rejection of

Christianity and of Christian God, but in this poem, Dickinson suggests that while her practice does not adhere to organized religion, she continues to engage with God and hold onto spiritual elements of the Christian faith while continuing to "keep the Sabbath," but at "Home," away from the Church. The poet's use of "Church," refers to both the physical worship space and the polity of Christianity, each a similar yet distinct meaning of "Church" ("Church"). The poet's diction, particularly utilizing "Sabbath" and "Church" in the introduction of her poem, helps distinguish institutional religious practices from the organic spirituality she maintains in nature.

In the third and fourth lines, Dickinson's speaker defines what "home" worship means: observing the sabbath means engaging with nature. As the bobolink sings, Dickinson listens in the orchard, a clear practice of her spirituality. The male bobolink, a small black bird with a yellow head, sings a short "metallic, bubbly, rambling song" to court mates each spring in the Northeastern United States ("Bobolink overview"). Dickinson equates this sharp mating call with the church choir, employing a device she uses throughout "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church." The poet connects nature and Christianity by naming the Bobolink her "chorister" and, considering the sharp gargling sound of the bird's song, suggests that spiritual song cuts through the soundscape of the natural world and invites ongoing pondering through its directionless melody (3). By using the bobolink, with its piercing and rambling call, as a symbol for her spiritual practice, Dickinson's speaker explains to readers that her spirituality is most obviously natural but also deeply thoughtful and evolving.

In the opening lines of "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]" Dickinson introduces one of her main literary devices, the extended comparison between elements in nature and elements of the Christian worship. Throughout her poem, she uses plentiful traditional church language and equates these terms with natural terms. This linking of language shows that

the poet's reverence for nature connects directly to God and spirituality, a solid argument against scholars who read Dickinson's nature writing as a secular rejection of religion. Further, the poet's rejection of religion specifically pertains to structural elements of the Congregational church, not the personal spiritually Dickinson's speaker finds in nature. The poet, thereby, shifts religious focus towards finding God in the natural world. Dickinson uses these ongoing metaphors to assert the spiritual value in her natural practices. In the first two lines, Dickinson juxtaposes "church" and "home" which in effect separate her speaker from the community of organized believers. Just as church references the physical space of worship and the organized institution of Christianity, church also alludes to the congregation, or collective of worshipers who join together in their faith. The church is also distinctly public while "Home" introduces the private sphere (2). Beginning with this juxtaposition, Dickinson creates space within the poem to define spirituality outside of the Christian institution. Dickinson continues, equating the "Bobolink" to a "chorister" and an "orchard" to a church or cathedral's "dome" (3–4). Dickinson uses elements of nature to validate her natural and experiential worship as she draws comparison between natural and religious symbols.

Through the second stanza, Dickinson continues to see, hear, and feel God in nature. The poet writes, "Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice / I, just wear my Wings" (5–6). Here, the speaker equates bird wings with white liturgical vestments. While Dickinson continues her project of finding religious meaning in nature, lines 5 and 6 also complicate voice and speaker. As the speaker "wears…Wings," Dickinson seems to suggest the speaker is a bird. Is the "I" Dickinson, or is her poem an imagining of a bird's spiritual experience? The speaker's broadening definition of worship in "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]" allows the reader to consider the poet's imagining of the spiritual world of birds and, moreover, of all the

natural world. However, I think reading "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]" as Dickinson's spiritual experience, in which she becomes part of nature, just as the congregation becomes part of the church, deepens the reader's understanding of her spirituality as it is connected to nature. Becoming a bird, or at least bird-like, through "keep[ing] the Sabbath" Dickinson argues that her nature-driven worship brings her closer to God. Dickinson suggests that God Himself transforms her into a bird, wearing "Wings" for worship, through his creative power over nature. Because birds fly, using their wings, the speaker implies that she can fly through this transformation, bringing her up into the sky and to approach the heavens above. Dickinson vividly experiences God's Word through her own creation of poetic language which here transforms the worshiper into a bird.

In the third stanza of "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", Emily Dickinson centers God, rather than religious practices, positions, and norms. In her first two stanzas, Dickinson makes nature her church as the "orchard" is her "dome," a chorus of birds sings in place of the organ and the congregation joining in hymn (4). While these opening stanzas successfully establish nature as a place of worship, Dickinson does not clarify the powerful act of worship in nature until she evokes God in the poem's ninth line, affirming the diety's presence in nature. Dickinson writes, "God preaches, a noted Clergyman" (9). Again, Dickinson plays with irony. Of course, God himself would be a "noted Clergyman," but by adding this humorous detail the speaker pokes fun at Church sermons given by established preachers who certainly were not as noteworthy as God. Dickinson also explains that her speaker's connection to God is direct. While churchgoers hear the Word of God mediated by Priest's or Pastor's interpretation as explained in sermons, Dickinson's preacher is God Himself, speaking to the poet through nature. In some ways, Dickinson's poem places her within the Methodist tradition of spiritual self-

discovery and an emphasis on a personal relationship with God. However, self-discovery leads the poet away from faith in the institutional Church and into nature to directly encounter the divine. In "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", Dickinson highlights the divinity of nature, both as she explains it as her church and as she writes about God's holy presence christening her "Sabbath."

The poem concludes by reasserting that God lives in nature, emphasizing and clarifying the poet's shifting spiritual focus towards God's presence on earth. Having explained nature as her church and God's direct presence within it, Dickinson concludes her poem, writing "So instead of getting to Heaven at last - / I'm going, all along" (11–12). With God's Word coming directly to Dickinson in nature, Dickinson shows that divinity is vivid and real in the living and earthly world should people look for it around them. Rather than focus on the promise of heaven, Dickinson explicitly explains that the speaker connects with God in life. Writing that she is "Going, all along," the poet declares her life as spiritually meaningful and suggests that heaven as a destination is not as meaningful as finding purpose in the journey of life (12). Like Anne Bradstreet, Dickinson writes powerfully of God in nature and uses her poetry to make sense of the abundant divine beauty in the natural world, arguing for a theology focused on God in the everyday and present life.

Dickinson's formal choices in "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", specifically her rejection of hymn meter through subtle reference in the poem's opening lines to conventions of the fourteener and ongoing ABCB rhyme scheme reinforce Dickinson's rejection of religious structure and choice to engage directly with God. Dickinson begins her first two lines following hymn meter, but in each line, she adds an additional stressed syllable at the end, breaking from hymn meter and emphasizing "Church" and "Home." Dickinson writes, "Some keep the Sabbath

going to Church- / I keep it, staying at Home" (1–2). Dickinson calls attention to her focus on spaces of worship, "Church" and "Home" —meaning nature—as she adds these one-syllable words, stressed, capitalized, and breaking from hymn meter. As the poem continues, Dickinson's verse strays completely from hymn meter but interestingly, she continues to keep an ABCB rhyme scheme. Dickinson's continued rhyme scheme may serve to highlight correlations she makes between nature and church, as she rhymes "Home" and "dome," and "Wings" and "sings." Al the same time, Dickinson's rhyme scheme highlights her ability to use hymn meter and intentionally reject of the system. Rather than finding God in verse through hymn meter, as did hymn writers, Dickinson rejects the notion that structure, both church structure and lyrical structure, and asserts that through nature and through her free poetry she finds a direct connection to God.

Reading "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]" within the context of Dickinson's other religious and spiritual poetry, particularly, "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", reveals her consistent interest in music and focus on transformation. Interestingly, in the first stanza of "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", Dickinson evokes the musical elements of church practice. Thinking back on "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson explains in both poems that she is moved by aural elements and that those are spiritually impactful. In "[I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -]", Dickinson cannot explain the power that the organ holds over her. More specifically, Dickinson cannot articulate how the organ transforms her into a "more Bernadine Girl" (6). In "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", Dickinson expresses more clearly her understanding of sound as a component of spiritual life. God and nature transform Dickinson's speaker into a bird, and as she gains "Wings," Dickinson seems to join the chorus of the "Bobolink" and "little Sexton," finding in song, particularly

birdsong, God and spirituality. In both poems, church music plays a large role in spiritual transformation but "[Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -]", suggests Dickinson has developed in her understanding of her spirituality as she becomes part of music making through her transformation into a "Winged" worshiper.

**Conclusion**

From my first readings of Bradstreet and Dickinson's poetry, I quickly found connections between Bradstreet's Puritan questioning and Dickinson's more radical approach to defining spirituality. As I continued to read closely more of their poems and consider this relationship, the topic remained robust and exciting. As I have argued throughout this paper, Bradstreet and Dickinson present theological thinking in their religious poetry. Rather than separate the poets from faith, religious questioning and appreciation for the natural and human world strengthen and redefine Bradstreet and Dickinson's poetic version of Christianity. Investigating and analyzing their poetry, similarities in theme and affect strengthen the impact of reading Bradstreet and Dickinson together. Reading them in conversation, while not holistic, presents a more fully fleshed understanding of the "early American" literary female experience.

While reading Bradstreet reveals important theological challenges to the female Puritan experience and Dickinson reveals a new and developing spirituality, reading the poets together presents a common trend in American female poetry. Though separated by two centuries, Bradstreet and Dickinson almost seem to talk like old friends, reflecting the same New England autumns and birdsongs. Through understanding Bradstreet and Dickinson, we come to find an ongoing poetic project from female American writers: continued spiritual and theological work done through poetry. While this project examines only Bradstreet and Dickinson, it is exciting to

consider how this kind of comparative thinking can illuminate other American female poets. Hopefully, by exploring theological poetic work from Bradstreet and Dickinson, I have encouraged readers to seek out similar trends in other female American poetry. At the least, I hope I have successfully encouraged readers to explore what these two incredible poets have to say about religion in their other poems. Both Bradstreet and Dickinson were very prolific and have given contemporary scholars the opportunity to gather a lifetime of work from our modern academic attempt to make meaning of the eternally meaningful art these poets graciously left behind for generations of readers. Reading Bradstreet and Dickinson theologically provides just one of many meaningful lenses through which we can appreciate and understand their poetry.

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