

Bunyan, Dudley, and Bradstreet: Weary Pilgrims in the New World



Fig. 1

John Bunyan in Bedford Gaol: "As I slept, I dreamed a dream."¹

Although there are discrepancies in publication dates and potential readership, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is a literary work closely connected to the New English experience of the first generation of transatlantic immigrants. Among those peripetetic colonists in the Winthrop fleet of 1630 were the families of Thomas Dudley and daughter Anne Dudley Bradstreet, then the eighteen-year-old wife of Simon Bradstreet. After a manuscript of her first poems, the quaternions, was 'published' in manuscript circulation for her father and his governing clique in 1642, Anne Bradstreet's poems were professionally published on London in 1650, and then posthumously in New Boston, Massachusetts in 1678. So, in terms of writerly influence, the causal and chronological relationship between the two writers would flow from Bradstreet to Bunyan, but both were working within still older cultural and biblical forms, including developing the metaphor of the weary pilgrim.

While Bradstreet's writing is far more sophisticated than Bunyan's, his religious

¹ Chuck Anesi, 1997-2000, <http://www.anesi.com/pilgrim.htm>

primitivism and allegorical landscape were well-suited for the seventeenth-century reader, both in Old and New England. Bunyan's style is closely associated with biblical narrative, and with the quest narrative. His pilgrim's journey away from his earthly family into the realm of God was of course stock material for the Puritan pre-occupation with the after-life. For example, the section on the pilgrim's encounter with the debauchery of "Vanity Fair" contains hyperbolic warnings about all the earthly excesses which New World Puritans might face, such as that of indolence and recreation, in that the fair at the town of Vanity "lasts all year long." At it you can buy "all such merchandise" as "houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts," and "whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not."² Ever concerned about not making his point, Bunyan continues, "Here are to be seen, too, and that for nothing, thefts, murders, adulteries, false swearers, and that of a blood-red color. . . . But, as in other fairs, some one commodity is as chief of all the fair, so the ware of Rome and her merchandise is greatly promoted in this fair."³

² John Bunyan, *The Annotated Pilgrim's Progress* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 124.

³ Bunyan, 124.

Fig.2⁴

And thus Bunyan reveals his real issue, that of anti-Catholicism. Still stinging from their mutual threat, the Protestants of England had not yet quite expunged their papal vitriol and mud-slinging. As Bradstreet, in the voice of Old England, in the poem, “A Dialogue between Old England and New; Concerning their Present Troubles, Anno, 1642,” adds to the anti-Catholic propaganda:

The Gospel trodden down and hath no right;
 Church offices were sold and bought for gain,
 That Pope had hope to find Rome here again.
 For oaths and blasphemies, did ever hear?
 From Belzebub himself such language hear?⁵

The voice of daughter ‘New England’ reminds her mother ‘Old England’ that things are better in England, as “After dark Popery the day did clear,” and the forces of Cromwell and the Protectorate of Puritan values would prevail: “These are the days the Church’s

⁴ Chuck Anesi, 1997-2000, <http://www.anesi.com/pilgrim.htm>

⁵ Jeannine Hensley, ed. *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1967), 182.

foes to crush/To root out Popelings head, tail, branch, and rush.”⁶ Bishop Laud, also mentioned in this Bradstreet poem, was now the heir-apparent to papal material.

Bradstreet’s later poem, “As Weary Pilgrim,” hand-dated August 31, 1669, but first published by John Harvard Ellis in his 1867 edition of Bradstreet’s works, contains the Christian pilgrim image, but she is not out to rewrite the Bible (like Milton), or continue to wave the flag of anti-Popery (like Bunyan). Her pilgrim is more contrite, more personal:

A pilgrim I, on earth perplexed
 With sins, with cares and sorrows vexed,
 By age and pains brought to decay,
 And my clay house mold’ring away.
 Oh how I long to be at rest
 And soar on high among the blest [. . .]
 Then Soul and Body shall unite
 And of their Maker have the sight.⁷

The function of the poem also develops the imagery of the corporeal as perishable, whereas the spirit or soul will transform and live eternally with the “Maker,” much like in her earlier poem, “the Flesh and the Spirit.” Her pilgrim has traversed a New World wilderness of erring paths, rugged stones, a burning sun and stormy rains, briars and thorns, hungry wolves, stumps and rocks.⁸

⁶ Hensley, 186. The allusion to ‘Popelings head’ refers to the Anglican clergy, which like the Catholic priesthood, wore excessive garments, which Bradstreet calls “Baal’s vestments”: “Their mitres, surplices, and all their tire/Copes, rochets, crosiers, and such empty trash.”

⁷ Hensley, 294.

⁸ Hensley, 294.

The image of the weary pilgrim, or of the worldly misery and trial gone through by the righteous tested, was a familiar one to all sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestants, and was a common fixture in religious literature. Indeed, earthly trial, including sickness and loss, was an important sign of being a “visible saint”: saints suffered; suffering and tribulation were/are signs of grace. Bradstreet’s father, Thomas Dudley, also used the ancient figure of the pilgrim as the governing trope in his prosaic “Letter to Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln” (1631). Bridget was the wife of his former employer, now investor, the Earl of Lincoln, at Sempringham, England. The letter recounts the first nine months of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and, for Dudley, is a “Narrative Retribution”-- an epistolary repayment to Lady Bridget for her own (now lost) letter to Dudley inquiring about the company’s progress, especially that of “some persons of great Note amongst us”⁹ -- presumably a reference to Gov. John Winthrop and the Lady Arbella Johnson.

Dudley begins in typical servant-to-patroness, obsequious style, yet quickly devolves into a new-style candor:

For the satisfaction of Your Honour, and some Friends,
and for the use of such as shall hereafter intend to increase
our Plantation in New England, I have in the throng of the
Domestick, and not altogether free from Publick Business,
thought fit to commit to memory our present condition, and

⁹ Thomas Dudley, “To the Right Honourable, My Very Good Lady, the Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln.” (1631): para. 3, <http://www.umich.edu.eebo.html>.

what hath befallen us since our Arrival here, which shall do shortly, after my usual manner, and must do rudely having yet no Table, nor other Room to Write in, then by the Fire-side upon my Knee, in this Sharp Winter; to which my Family must have leave to resort, though they break good manners, and make me many times forget what I would [should] say, and say what I would [should] not.¹⁰

Here Dudley is complaining about the physical deprivations of this New English pilgrimage, such as no table to write on, a very cold winter, a dearth of good manners. These things would have made a startling impression on the Countess. And like Bunyan's pilgrim, these simple deprivations would have satisfied the first requirement of all pilgrimages -- that of primitive circumstances.

Dudley continues with a brief account of the pilgrims in Plymouth, who experienced "Famine, Poverty, and great Mortality."¹¹ He next touches on the Massachusetts Bay Colony's current history and Old English formation: "About the year 1627, some Friends being together in Lincolnshire, fell into discourse about New England and the Planting of the Gospel there"; this group, with which he immigrated, "made a long, troublesome and costly Voyage, . . . so scattered with Mists and Tempests, . . . Arrived here in June and July [1630], where we found the Colony in a sad and unexpected condition, above Eighty of them being Dead in the Winter before."¹²

¹⁰ Dudley, pars. 1-2.

¹¹ Dudley, par. 2.

¹² Dudley, par. 3

Dudley's careful chronology also provides a source for Thomas Morton's episode at Mount Wollaston; for the emancipation of the many bonded, indentured servants who sailed with the elite of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; for the politics of Governors Endicott, Saltonstall, and Winthrop; for the many deaths and house fires; for the regular trade with the Narragansett natives; and most importantly, for the ideological framework of the divine plan -- that all that befell the colonists was according to God's will. After their arrival in summer 1630, they sent back the ship *Lyon* "to return to us with all speed, with fresh supplies of Victuals"; but by September, "The Ship being gone, victuals wasting, and mortality increasing, we held divers Fasts in our several Congregations, but the Lord would not be Deprecated."¹³ And many more Colonists then died that fall, including Mr. Issac Johnson, husband of the flagship's namesake, Lady Arbella (already dead at landing). Johnson was noted by Dudley as a religious zealot, who died "willingly, professing his life better spent in promoting the Plantation, than it could have been any other way."¹⁴

So, to Bunyan's concept of the weary, wasting, and tormented pilgrim, or perhaps also to an older literary model, that of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, Dudley adds the facet of martyrdom. The endeavors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were of such a holy nature that their sacrifice assumed a sacred level. Dudley would have been familiar with the biblical precept of discipline, that of Godly teaching; that God only disciplines (or corrects or tests) those whom He loves -- a very Pauline concept -- as St. Paul states in

¹³ Dudley, par. 3.

¹⁴ Dudley, par. 3.

Hebrews: “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. . . . God disciplines us for our own good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb. 12:7,10 also cf. Psalms 94:12 and 1John 4:18).¹⁵ According to Dudley, “those who Survived [that first winter] were not discouraged, but bearing God’s corrections with Humility,”¹⁶ were certain of their righteousness. Again, in the English Puritan community, and in the Fundamentalist’s mind, to be “corrected” by God meant to be loved by God.

Dudley and Bradstreet both kept true to Old English and biblical imagery of the pilgrim in the New World. Bunyan’s treatment of pilgrimage in the Restoration era *Pilgrim’s Progress* cannot be argued to be directly derivative of his puritan New English predecessors; however, the pilgrim an almost universally accessible trope. As Bunyan’s pilgrim alludes to the New English Diaspora,

CHRISTIAN: I was driven out of my native country by a dreadful sound that was in mine ears; to wit, that unavoidable destruction did attend me, if I abode in that place where I was.

PIETY: But how did it happen that you came out of your country this way?

CHRISTIAN: It was as God would have it; for when I was under the fears of destruction, I did not know whither to go; but by chance there came a man, even to me, as I was trembling and weeping, whose name is Evangelist . . .¹⁷

¹⁵ Discipline is different, etymologically and otherwise, than punishment: teaching is not punitive.

¹⁶ Dudley, par. 4.

¹⁷ Bunyan, John. *Pilgrim’s Progress*. (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Calvin College, 2007) <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bunyan/pilgrim.txt>

The pilgrim Christian experiences the threat of ‘destruction,’ a requisite for a true trial of faith. Physical challenge and deprivation, as we have seen in Dudley’s letter, as well as doubt, are also components of pilgrimage. In her prose piece, “To my Dear Children” (166?), Bradstreet writes a kind of personal conversion narrative to her children, explaining her faith journey, which included immigration to Massachusetts. She states,

I have often been perplexed that I have not found that constant joy in my Pilgrimage and [that] refreshing which I supposed that most servants of God have, although He hath not left me altogether without the witness of His holy spirit, . . . I have sometimes tasted of that hidden manna that the world knows not, . . . yet have I many times sinkings and droopings [of faith].¹⁸

Her anti-Catholicism has waned by this letter as well, as she openly questions her earlier position, “Yet why may not the Popish religion be right? They have the same God, the same Christ, the same word. They only *enterpret* it one way, we another.”¹⁹ Likewise, Bunyan’s agenda is not, in the end, anti-Catholicism, as his allegory which begins in a dream-state has more of a somnambulant than political or sectarian quality:

Then I saw in my dream. . . in this valley of Humiliation, poor Christian was hard put to it; for he had gone but a little way before he espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him: his name is Apollyon. Then did Christian begin to be afraid, . . . [but] he resolved to venture and stand his ground So he went on, and Apollyon met him. Now the monster was hideous to behold: he was clothed with scales like a fish, . . . ; he had wings like a dragon, and feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke; and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion. When he was come up to Christian, he beheld him with a disdainful countenance, and thus began

¹⁸ Hensley, 243.

¹⁹ Hensley, 244.

to question him.

APOLLYON: Whence came you, and whither are you bound?

CHRISTIAN: I am come from the city of Destruction, which is the place of all evil, and I am going to the city of Zion.²⁰ [The commitment to finish the pilgrimage]

This monster, Apollyon, is not exactly the chimera that John imagines in Revelations, not exactly the anti-Christ, therefore not papal but simply satanic. In the end, the pilgrim must match both symbolic and material monsters. For Dudley, it was a severe lack of comfort and material needs which affected behavior and lifestyle issues. For Bradstreet, it was the reality of both physical and spiritual exhaustion and doubt, initially spawned by hatred toward that commonplace enemy or monster, the Catholic Church. Bunyan's pilgrim never crosses the ocean to avoid 'destruction' and to practice his faith, but he does traverse miles of dreamy terrain, meeting both struggle and salvation.



Fig. 3²¹

Christian before the Cross.

"His burden fell off his back, and began to tumble."

²⁰ Bunyan, Calvin College text, Part 1, Fourth Stage.

²¹ Chuck Anesi, 1997-2000, <http://www.anesi.com/pilgrim.htm>

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