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### Women's Self-Definition Through Poetry

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# WOMEN'S SELF- DEFINITION THROUGH POETRY

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By: Olivia Samimy



## I. Introduction and Context

The roots of this project have been growing throughout the course of all the literature classes I have taken thus far in college. I have always had a particular interest in female poets and how the barriers to women writing affected the work produced by women who were able to overcome these challenges. In my British Literature class freshman year, I learned about Aphra Behn, a woman writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She was frequently criticized for being lewd; a critique I did not fully understand at the time, because she was criticized for things that I saw excused in her male contemporaries. The following year, I learned of Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan poet from America. I was especially confused about any criticism she may have faced because Anne Bradstreet was fond of writing about God and her family, topics I considered quite tame. It was after these two experiences that I decided that I wanted to learn more about women poets. My questions led to this distinction project, where I will be exploring five female poets who used their poetry to write about their experiences. I will be examining the different female perspectives they offered, the barriers they faced, and the way their society reacted to them.

In this project, I choose to focus exclusively on female poets. Women face a set of distinct barriers to writing that their male counterparts are not subjected to. It has been a consistent theme throughout history that women have been discouraged from intellectual pursuits like writing. Gerda Lerner explains this struggle in her book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. Women were confined to the home, where their energy was relegated to supporting the lives of men, freeing men to engage in intellectual pursuits, while the women had no such luxury (Lerner 11). Women were frequently denied the chance to have an education, in favor of encouraging them to devote themselves to household duties. Women who did choose to have an education frequently were forced to choose said education over motherhood (Lerner 11).

Since an education is so crucial to writing, I will pay special attention to the educational opportunities afforded to the female writers I am studying.

As a result of the way women were excluded from the intellectual life, they were often left out of history. This meant that a woman who did write or engage in some intellectual pursuit had no peers to compare herself to. She would be forced to compare her work to the work of men, who had innumerable advantages over her (Lerner 12). Once women have surpassed these challenges and actually begin to write, they face another challenge. Since women are assumed to be inherently inferior, a female writer must strive to convince the reader that she and her writing have worth (Lerner 10). This is not a challenge that male writers had to undertake. Women also had to reckon with gender constraints that were placed on their writing. They could choose to write inside these narrow confines, or break out of them and face criticism as a result (Lerner 168). Women's writing is inseparable from the challenges they faced in creating it.

From a linguistic standpoint, it has been shown that women have a different writing style than men. A study was done at Baruch College where samples from 100 different published texts were analyzed for style, sequencing, structure, and rhetorical strategies. From this study, it emerged that there was a clear difference between the male authors and the female authors (Hiatt 223). In addition to linguistic differences, women have different experiences from men. Lerner explains this difference by saying, "the male and the female poet live in a gendered society, that is, one in which the societal definitions of behavior and expectations appropriate to the sexes are embedded in every institution of society" (Lerner 168). It stands to reason that the difference in lived experience between the male poet and the female poet will result in differences in writing. Women have a unique perspective that shows through in their writing, which is why this project will exclusively focus on women writers.

In this project, I will be looking at some of the women who managed to overcome these barriers and produce great work. I chose five female poets from across history who overcame these obstacles in different ways. First, I will start with Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan woman who wrote about her children and her relationship with God. Next, I will move to Aphra Behn, a British woman in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. She was the first woman to make a living writing in English, and drew heavy controversy for the sexual topics she used in her plays and poems. Third is Forough Farrokhzad, a poet who was writing in Iran in the 1950s and 60s. Her poetry was banned by the Iranian government for detailing the sexuality and oppression of women. Next, I will look at Anne Sexton, an American writing in the 1960s. She wrote heavily autobiographical poems that were seen as unsophisticated. Last in the project is Sylvia Plath, a peer of Anne Sexton, and a confessional poet.

These five writers all used their poetry as an opportunity to define themselves through writing about their own experiences as women. This is a privilege in a patriarchal society where it is so often up to men to define the role of a woman. Sandra Gilbert explains that poetry can be “a mode of self-definition within and against the context of prevailing male definitions of women” (Gilbert 105). Anne Bradstreet chose to define herself within the context of the patriarchally constructed expectations for women. She was comfortable defining herself through her experiences as a wife, mother, and devout Christian. In contrast, Aphra Behn’s definition of herself rejected many expectations for women; she was open about her sexuality and readily criticized social inequalities. Forough Farrokhzad also used her poetry to define herself outside of the patriarchal expectations for women. In her poetry, she is a liberated woman, free from oppression. Sexton’s self-definition is a little more complicated, because she exists simultaneously within and outside of patriarchal expectations. She identifies with her role as a

housewife, but goes deeper to reveal her personal struggle with mental illness. Similarly, Sylvia Plath defines herself through her emotional struggles and experiences. Gilbert writes about the poetry of self-definition, saying that the female poet “writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self” (Gilbert 102). These five poets all used their poetry to craft an individual definition of themselves.

## II. **Anne Bradstreet**

Anne Bradstreet was a Puritan woman who arrived in America in the year 1630 in what is now Massachusetts. In most ways, Bradstreet was a typical Puritan woman in the New World. She was married to a governor of Massachusetts, and for the most part she devoted herself to taking care of him and their eight children (Gordon 240). However, unlike most women in her community, Anne Bradstreet was a prolific writer. She would frequently stay up late at night writing, after she had put all the children to bed. These poems remained private until 1650 when her brother-in-law published Bradstreet’s collection of poems, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, making Bradstreet the first published poet in the New World (Gordon 241).

For the beginning of her life, Bradstreet was educated by her mother, who taught her scripture, as well as the appropriate role of a woman as a wife and mother. Her mother taught her that a woman should have “restraint, modesty, and selflessness” (Gordon 20). When Bradstreet was eight, her father began to work as the steward for an earl. This was a remarkable stroke of luck for Bradstreet, because it meant she was afforded a nobleman’s education (Gordon 28). The mother of the earl was in charge of the education of the girls of the household, and she made sure they were educated in classical history and literature (Gordon 32). According to an account written by one of the children of the earl, Anne’s mother was not fully supportive of Anne’s passion for learning, and she made sure Anne prioritized her domestic chores (Gordon 36).

Finding a balance between the domestic and the intellectual is something Bradstreet would struggle with her whole life. In her education, Bradstreet took a special liking to poetry. She would have only been exposed to male poets in her education, because women were not believed to have the intellectual capacity for verse (Gordon 34). Bradstreet was very lucky to have the literary education she received, but her fellow Puritan women were entirely excluded from it.

Anne Bradstreet grew up to live and write in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This was not a place where women were encouraged to share their own experiences and opinions. Women were required like everyone else to go to church many times a week, but were forbidden from speaking during the service (Gordon 175). It follows that women were not encouraged to write. John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, said about a woman in their colony: “[She] was fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her diverse years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books” (Stanford 374). Puritans believed that males were made superior by God, and for a woman to use her wits too much was an affront to the natural order of things (Stanford 376). It was common for Puritan preachers to preach about the inferiority of women and the dangers of an ambitious woman. Anne Bradstreet regularly attended church, so she certainly knew her society’s opinion on these matters. It was in this environment that she boldly chose to dedicate her time to poetry and eventually pursue publishing a volume of her work.

Despite Puritan America’s views of women writers, Anne Bradstreet’s work was met with only light criticism. The main issue she faced was people spreading rumors that she must have plagiarized her work because a woman could not possibly be responsible for eloquent poetry (Gordon 244). Other than that, she was able to evade most of the judgment that Puritan

women suffered for writing. Although she was writing about her own experiences, she was not criticized for it, unlike the other women in this project. A contributing factor to this was likely the fact that Bradstreet focused her writing on experiences that were culturally acceptable for women. Her poems mainly focus on God, her husband, and her children. She defines herself within the confines of what was expected of women. Likely it was this focus on acceptably domestic topics that allowed Bradstreet to escape negative reactions.

In “The Author to her Book” Bradstreet reframes her writing into an acceptable venture for a woman. In it, she responds to people who say women should be taking care of children, not writing. In this poem, Bradstreet refers to her book as: “Thou ill-form’d offspring of my feeble brain / Who after birth did’st by my side remain” and “My rambling brat (in print) should mother call” (lines 1-2, 8) (Bradstreet’s parenthesis). Bradstreet has expertly transformed her relationship with her book into that of the relationship between a mother and child. As established earlier, Puritan America did not look favorably upon a woman who expressed her own ideas through writing. However, the role of a woman as a mother was one her culture was very comfortable with. Bradstreet framed her poetry in an acceptable context. She did not *write* a book; she *birthed* another child.

Bradstreet also uses her poetry to support the idea that women are inferior to men. This idea was often used to argue that women could not write, but Bradstreet attempts to demonstrate in her poetry that women can be inferior and still write. In “The Author to her Book” she separates herself from male writers by calling herself “feeble-minded.” In a similarly self-deprecating manner, she acknowledges flaws in her book. Of the book she says:

“I cast thee by as one unfit for light,  
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;  
Yet being mine own, at length affection would

Thy blemishes amend, if so I could” (lines 9-12).

Bradstreet focuses on the imperfections of her poetry, calling them “blemishes,” even going so far as to imply that she is annoyed by the very sight of her own work. She also uses her poetry to respond to the accusations of plagiarism that female writers often faced because it was assumed that women were not intelligent enough to write their own work. While Bradstreet calls herself “feeble-minded,” she does assure readers that this is her own poetry. In “The Prologue” she says of the critics: “For such despite they cast on Female wits; / If what I do prove well, it won’t advance, / They’ll say it’s stolen, or else it was by chance” (line 28-30). Bradstreet is walking a fine line, where she defines herself as less intelligent than men, yet still smart enough to craft her own book.

Bradstreet also defines herself when she writes about being a wife and mother and being a devout Christian, which were all very encouraged roles in Puritan America. In “Before the Birth of One of her Children” Bradstreet writes for her husband in case she dies in childbirth. It’s a very poignant poem, as she addresses a fear that was very real for mothers of the time. She tells her husband “And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains / Look to my little babes, my dear remains” (lines 21-22). She also writes beautiful love poems to her husband, like “To my Dear and loving Husband.” In this poem she tells him “I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold” (line 5). Bradstreet is also very comfortable with writing about how much she loves God. “By Night when Others Soundly Slept” is a poem about her dedication to God. She says of Him, “I’ll serve him here whilst I shall live / And Love him to Eternity” (lines 15-16). Bradstreet’s definition of herself stays within patriarchal expectations for women of her time.

Bradstreet enjoyed modest success in her time, but she was mostly forgotten after the Civil War (Gordon 283). It was not until the 1970s that the first-wave of feminist literary critics

recovered Anne Bradstreet's work as one of the great women writers lost to time (Gordon 284). In modern days, Bradstreet has a firmly cemented place in the canon. She's rightfully remembered as an important contributor to American literature. Bradstreet wrote impressive poetry, but was required to constantly justify her ability to write such poetry. Despite the disadvantages she faced, she has left a lasting legacy in American literature as the first published American poet. In her poetry, Bradstreet found a way to make her voice heard. She defines herself through her life experiences as a mother, wife, and devout Christian. This was a remarkable accomplishment in a society that devalued a woman's voice and experiences.

### III. **Aphra Behn**

Aphra Behn was a successful playwright and poet in seventeenth century England. She is often remembered for being the first woman to make a living from writing in English (Lerner 174). She frequently questioned patriarchal conventions and refused to adhere to the patriarchal definitions of a woman's role (Lerner 179). This led to her being regarded as lewd and uncouth. Writer George Woodcock said of his colleagues in the 1940s "Nobody really knew what Aphra Behn had done, but there was a feeling that it was mostly rather distasteful" (IX). While she was forgotten in some circles, she was rightfully remembered in others. Virginia Woolf said of her: "All women together ought to let flowers fall on the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds" (qtd. in Woodcock IX). In the course of her literary career, Aphra Behn used her writing to speak her mind and express her own experiences.

It is difficult to know much about the education Aphra Behn received. Little is known about her early life, with historians even disagreeing about who her parents were and what kind of social status she grew up with (Woodcock 13). Since education was a privilege of the wealthy, Aphra Behn only would have received a formal education if she had been born a gentlewoman. It

is known that she was married at some point, and widowed in 1665 before her writing career began (Woodcock 25). It is clear that Aphra Behn was well read, since her poetry and plays include many allusions to French literature (Woodcock 23). However, it is impossible to know if this knowledge came from personal reading or from formal schooling. It is generally thought that Aphra Behn was not educated on drama, because her plays were often criticized for not following the “rules” of classical drama (Todd 7). For the most part, her plays were successful nonetheless (Todd 9). Perhaps as a result, she was able to take more artistic freedom with them, since she was not caught up what was expected of a classical drama.

Aphra Behn did not fit the definition of what was expected for female writers in her time. She was often compared unfavorably to her contemporary, Katherine Philips. Philips frequently wrote about female friendships and children, which were acceptable topics for a woman poet. Philips was exalted as the appropriate kind of female poet, while Aphra Behn was called gross and lewd in comparison (Todd 44). Behn did not fit the modest role expected of women in her time. Her writing contained open portrayals of sexual situations and liberated women, which were not acceptable topics for women to write about. Her writing also contained references to her radical ideas. She was against slavery and believed that people of color were not lesser than white people, she argued that the institution of marriage was harmful to women, and she believed that women were not inherently inferior to men (Woodcock 151). Her writing was successful and popular, but her radical opinions and refusal to adhere to norms for women writers garnered her criticism as well.

Aphra Behn endured insults and accusations hurled at her and her writing. Since she broke out of the narrow confines that a woman was expected to live in, she was accused of not being a woman at all, but rather a hermaphrodite. In 1688 *Journal from Parnassus* declared Behn

“a hermaphrodite, not fit to enjoy the benefits of either sex and certainly not to join the society of poets” (Todd 16). Another frequent attack on her character was the accusation that she was sexually promiscuous or, in more extreme cases, a prostitute; an unfounded accusation that literary scholars have repeated as recently as the eighties (Conway 88). Such accusations are a response to how sexually frank Behn’s poetry is, but of course, frankness does not mean she was a prostitute. They also show the false dichotomy women are often forced into. If women are not chaste and pure, they are labeled a whore, like Behn was. Her frankness regarding sex in her writing was also the basis of many other kind of critiques of her. Alexander Pope, who lived shortly after Aphra Behn, famously dismissed her as the writer who “fairly put all Characters to bed!” (Todd 33). She has been called by other critics from various time periods “a mere harlot who danced through uncleanness” (Woodcock 7), “abominably vile” (Todd 12), “a wreck of all that is delicate and refined in women” (Todd 49), and finally “literary garbage” (Todd 57). Despite being widely popular, Aphra Behn was constantly criticized for her writing.

It is unlikely that Aphra Behn would have faced this harsh criticism if it were not for her gender. This is a fact Aphra Behn was clearly aware of. She says of some of her critics:

In some of their most Celebrated Plays have entertain’d ‘em with things, that if I should here strip from their Wit and Occasion that conducts ‘em in and makes them proper, their fair Cheecks would perhaps wear a natural Colour at the reading of them: yet are never taken Notice of, because a Man writ them, and they may hear that from them they blush at from a Woman (Woodcock 182).

In this quote, Behn is pointing out that the bawdiness that critics often complain about in her plays is present in many other plays by men. When a male writer is lewd or uncouth it does not raise any eyebrows from critics, but when she does it, she is mercilessly attacked. Woodcock agrees on this point, saying Aphra Behn was no more lewd than her male contemporaries, Dryden and Wycherley (Woodcock 8). Behn was not writing on very different subjects from her peers,

yet she was the only one faced with so much lasting disdain from critics. The only difference between her and her contemporaries was that she was a woman. Aphra Behn's writing was held to a different standard because of her gender.

Aphra Behn frequently used her poetry to respond to the sexism that women faced in everyday life during the seventeenth century. This can especially be seen in her poem "To Alexis in Answer to his Poem Against Fruition." In this poem, she responds to the fictional male character Alexis to lament the unfair way men treat women in romantic relationships. She says of men: "Since man with that inconstancy was born / To love the absent, and the present scorn" (lines 15-16). Here she is complaining that men can never stay satisfied with a woman. They are always looking for the next woman while they "scorn" the woman they are with at the present. She also talks about how women cannot win in relationships with men: "We lose 'em by too much desert, / And Oh! They fly us if we yield" (lines 24-25). She is talking about how a man will leave a woman if she refuses to have sex with him, but he will also abandon her if she gives in to his desire. In this poem, she shows how women are unfairly disadvantaged by relationships with men. There is nothing they can do keep a man from abandoning them for another woman, and men will find fault with any aspect of a woman's sexuality.

"The Return" also deals with an issue that women faced in relationships during the seventeenth century. It shows a wicked man, Amyntas, in his quest to seduce a new woman. The woman resists his charms at first, but "her efforts are but vain" (line 12) Behn clearly has disdain for the man in her poem; she calls him "a tyrant" and "pitiless" (lines 15, 4). This poem is a condemnation of men who are sexually predatory and do not consider the effects of their actions on the women they seduce. Chastity and modesty were extremely important feminine qualities in this society, and an unmarried woman who was known to no longer be a virgin could face dire

social consequences (Woodcock 9). This is obviously not something that Amyntas is considering in his pursuit of the woman. She is referred to as his “conquest,” and we can assume he will get what he wants and then leave her (line 17). This is another social hypocrisy that Aphra Behn was commenting on. Men would pursue women to get what they wanted, but then women became the victims of social ridicule as a result.

Aphra Behn’s poem, “The Disappointment,” is about the shepherd, Lysander, seducing Cloris, only to find that he is unable to perform. This poem counters the male genre of the seduction poem. “The Disappointment” is different from this genre for a couple reasons. For one, the male of the narrative is not narrating the poem. Instead, “The Disappointment” is narrated from a third-party perspective. The women in typical seduction poems are frequently presented as two-dimensional objects to be conquered (Fabricant 347). This is true for the beginning of “The Disappointment,” where the maid lies still in a trance: “Cloris half dead and breathless lay” (line 55). However, later in the poem she is able to regain her autonomy. After Lysander fails in the act, she flees through the forest (lines 129). Without the presence of his lover, Lysander fails to regain his power in any way and he is stuck in “Hell of Impotence” (line 140). In “The Disappointment,” Aphra Behn puts a female-voiced twist onto the male-dominated genre of the seduction poem, and pokes fun at perceived male sexual prowess.

Aphra Behn had remarkable conviction and steadfastness in her writing. She chose to define herself outside of the appropriate role of women, instead giving herself a voice of authority on women’s perspectives. Rather than write on acceptable feminine topics, she criticized the male hypocrisy surrounding seduction in “To Alexis in Answer to his Poem Against Fruition” and “The Return.” She even wrote her famous poem “The Disappointment” in the male genre of the seduction poem. She wrote about female experiences, which was a

perspective lacking in the writing of her time. Her writing offers a unique feminine perspective during an era where the literary world was dominated by men. Aphra Behn was a woman comfortable with expressing her authority through her pen.

Aphra Behn's work fell out of popularity beginning in the nineteenth century. The increasingly conservative Victorian era had no place for an outspoken, occasionally crude, woman writer like Aphra Behn. She was included in an anthology here or there, but was mostly ignored (Todd 44). The New Critic wave in the early twentieth century neglected Aphra Behn as well. It was not until the first wave of feminist literary criticism hit that Aphra Behn's writing began to gain popularity again (Conway 87). In a modern climate, Behn's work can finally be enjoyed free of the sexist ridicule she faced. Thanks to the feminist scholars who uncovered her work, Aphra Behn is now rightfully remembered as a playwright, poet, novelist, and incredibly outspoken writer who was unafraid of documenting the taboo side of the female experience.

#### **IV. Forough Farrokhzad**

Forough Farrokhzad was a famous Iranian poet during the 1950s and early 60s. She published four collections of poetry during her lifetime. Farrokhzad was known for using her poetry to question and criticize the patriarchal social structure of Iran. Iran was, and continues to be, a deeply traditional society, and Farrokhzad's poetry garnered harsh criticism as a result, eventually being banned outright (Darznik 107). Despite her controversial status, Farrokhzad is an iconic figure in Iranian literature, known for her intimate and shockingly uninhibited poetry. In an interview, professor of Middle Eastern culture Farzaneh Milani, compares Farrokhzad's fame in Iran to that of movie stars in America (Radjy). Forough Farrokhzad found a way to write poetry that deeply connected with the people of Iran.

Forough Farrokhzad grew up in the Iranian capital of Tehran. She attended public school until ninth grade, when she went to a girl's school that taught painting and dress-making. Her father discouraged her from intellectual pursuits, directing her instead towards more feminine tasks. Later in her life, she said in a letter to her father: "I remember when I used to read philosophical journals at home, you would judge me by saying that I was a stupid girl whose mind had been poisoned by reading journals" (qtd. in Katouzian 11). Then, at seventeen, she left school altogether to marry a man fifteen years older than her and had a son with him (Talattof 84). In this marriage, she felt stifled and trapped, inspiring some of her early poetry. She eventually left her husband and returned to her father's house, where, free from the constraints of her marriage, she began to compose her famous poetry collections (Talattof 85).

Farrokhzad was defining herself outside of Iranian cultural norms by choosing to write poetry. Women in Iran were expected to get married and stay at home silently taking care of their husbands. They were generally discouraged from intellectual pursuits like writing (Darznik 105). Farrokhzad would not be confined by these restraints. She wrote unabashedly honest and intimate poems. One particular thing she was criticized for was the open way she talked about her sexuality in her poems. Writing poetry this sensual was described by her critics as a kind of "particularly depraved female sentimentality" (Darznik 106). Her own father also criticized her for this, reportedly calling her a "street woman," and openly refusing to accept her liberated lifestyle (Katouzian 12). Farrokhzad also garnered criticism for her use of poetry to attack the patriarchal structure of Iranian society. She said in one of the afterwords of her books: "Perhaps because no woman before me took steps toward breaking the shackles binding women's hands and feet, and because I am the first to do so, they have made such a controversy out of me" (qtd. in Radjy). Despite the controversy surrounding her work, Forough Farrokhzad was an extremely

popular poet during her lifetime and in the years following her death. She had such an effect on Iranian culture that she was often called “the poet of her generation” (Darznik 107).

Forough Farrokhzad used her poetry to express her frustration with the circumstances of her marriage. One of her early poems, “Captive,” shows how trapped she was feeling in her marriage to Parviz Shapour. She compares herself to a bird trapped in a cage longing to be free: “I daydream-escape this silent cage / in a moment when my jailer slackens” (Farrokhzad lines 9-10). She, like the bird, wishes to escape her oppressive circumstances. However, she also expresses fear that she is not capable of leaving the marriage at all. Though she wants to be free, she does not know if she has the strength anymore:

I daydream all this, but I know  
I do not have the strength to leave;  
even if my jailer lets me go,  
I do not have enough breath for flight (Farrokhzad lines 13-16).

Her apprehension here is understandable. Divorce was not encouraged in Iran, and she faced harsh judgement from her father when she left her husband and returned home (Talattof 85).

Another complication enters the picture when she considers her son, whom she would need to leave behind if she were to separate from her husband. She wonders how she could ever leave him, even if that were the only route to freedom. Farrokhzad creates a beautiful, intimate poem by sharing her experiences of being confined in a bad marriage.

Farrokhzad’s poem “The Ring” shows another young woman trapped in marriage. In “The Captive,” Farrokhzad uses a first-person perspective to talk of her own struggles, but in “The Ring” she switches to third-person to show another woman affected by the confines of marriage. The woman is shown admiring her wedding band and thinking of all the hope she had for her marriage early on. Her community told her that marriage was an exciting thing that she

would enjoy. As the years pass, and she contemplates her husband's treatment of her, she realizes she's trapped by her marriage. She feels it has caused her to waste her life taking care of her husband: "This band— / so lustrous and aglow— / is the clamp of bondage, of slavery" (Farrokhzad lines 18-20). Farrokhzad boldly used her poetry to show how marriage could trap women in unpleasant circumstances. This was an unprecedented stance to take in Iranian literature. Farrokhzad's work is unique for the way it documents the unpleasant parts of the female experience in Iranian culture.

Forough Farrokhzad used her poetry to advocate for women's liberation from all oppressive circumstances, not just marriage. In "Call to Arms," she laments the oppression of Iranian women by addressing them directly. She complains that women have suffered too long "in bonds of wretchedness, misfortune, and cruelty" (Farrokhzad line 2). She also points out the hypocrisy that men depend on women for so much, yet continue to oppress them:

It is your warm embracing bosom  
that nurtures proud and pompous man;  
it is your joyous smile that bestows  
on his heart warmth and vigour (Farrokhzad lines 9-12).

Farrokhzad's unwaveringly honest poem calls attention to the injustice Iranian women face. In a similar poem, "To My Sister," Farrokhzad urges the women of Iran to take action against this oppression she has just described. She repeatedly urges the women to "rise up" to escape oppression. She wants her sisters to seek equality and freedom in Iran: "for the sake of your freedom, strive / to change the law, rise up" (Farrokhzad lines 23-24). Forough Farrokhzad did not shy away from using her poetry to comment on the oppression of women.

In Iran, it was common for people to believe women to be irrational and unintelligent. This misconception is something Farrokhzad had to contend with while she was writing (Darznik

105). A woman's voice was not thought to be authoritative in her culture, but Forough Farrokhzad was able to keep her voice distinctly feminine *and* take authority. She used her poetry to define herself as a supporter of social change to benefit women. As someone who lived in the culture and experienced oppression, she did this by sharing her own personal experiences and connecting them with the universal female experience. She was also comfortable sharing her experiences in a way that broke out of the confines of what was expected of a woman. This can be seen in her controversial poem "Sin," where she writes about having an extramarital affair with a man. Even in her oppressive culture, she was able to express herself about her sexuality. Because of the way Farrokhzad wrote honestly and intimately about her experiences, she is often called a confessional poet, similar to America's Sylvia Plath (Darznik 104). Forough Farrokhzad was able to take authority by voicing her own personal experiences in a way that connected to the larger experience of women in her culture. This was an especially remarkable thing to do in a culture where women's voices were not valued on the same level as men's.

Unlike the English Aphra Behn, who was controversial in her lifetime and accepted later on, Forough Farrokhzad's poetry actually became more controversial after her death. Twelve years after Farrokhzad's death in 1967, Iran had a revolution, which resulted in the country becoming an Islamic State. In the new, and extremely conservative Iran, Farrokhzad's poetry was officially banned and could only be found on the black market (Darznik 107). This is likely because her work directly conflicts with the idea that women need to be silent and that their opinions and experiences do not matter. The revolution caused many people to flee Iran, taking Farrokhzad's work with them. Professor of Persian literature, Fatemeh Shams, said: "Many people who left Iran in the 1980s took three books with them: Saadi, Rumi, Forough" (qtd. in Radjy). Forough Farrokhzad's work is illicit in Iran, but it is appreciated by many of the Iranian

immigrants who are now living in America and Europe. For them, she is a symbol of the great artistic work their country was able to produce, before it was stifled by the oppressive regime put in place after the revolution (Karim 181). She has a special place in what Dr. Persis Karim calls “exilic Iranian culture” (181). Farrokhzad is loved by all those who were forced to leave Iran after the revolution that banned her poetry. She is remembered as a forward-thinker, who advocated for women’s liberation. Though Forough Farrokhzad’s work may be banned in her homeland, her legacy lives on all over the world.

## V. **Anne Sexton**

Anne Sexton was an American confessional poet famous in the 1960s. She began writing poetry at the suggestion of her therapist, while she was undergoing treatment for post-partum depression. Though she did not begin writing seriously until age twenty-eight, she quickly rose to fame in the confessional poet movement (*Anne Middlebrook* 3). Unlike the other poets in this movement, she had no formal higher education. She was known for writing on unconventional topics, which were not considered appropriate for poetry. She was often criticized for being overly-autobiographical and sentimental (*Anne Middlebrook* 172). Despite this, her readers loved her work, and she was awarded countless honors for her writing in both America and Britain (*Anne Middlebrook* 193).

Anne Sexton was born to an upper-class family living in Massachusetts in 1928. In her teenage years, she went to a private finishing school for girls. Instead of choosing to pursue higher education after this, she got married at age eighteen. Following a pregnancy scare, Anne’s mother advised her to elope to North Carolina where the legal marrying age was only eighteen (*Anne Middlebrook* 22). Following her hasty marriage, Sexton moved in with her husband, Alfred Sexton, and began her new life’s path as a housewife (*Anne Middlebrook* 23). That was

the end of Sexton's education until years later, when her therapist suggested that she begin writing poems as a way to express her feelings. When she found that she had a passion for poetry, she enrolled in an adult education class on poetry at The Boston Center for Adult Education (*Housewife* Middlebrook 485). In some ways, her lack of formal education actually worked in her favor. In contrast to the well-educated poets of the time who often were caught up in following tradition, Anne Sexton wrote unabashedly and freely in both form and subject (*Housewife* Middlebrook 488). In this way, her poetry was able to connect with more average people, rather than staying in refined poetic circles. One of her fans proudly announced "I don't read poetry, but I read Anne Sexton" (*Anne* Middlebrook XIX).

Unlike the three poets previously covered here, Anne Sexton was lucky enough to live in a time and culture where female poets were flourishing. Sexton had a circle of female writer peers who she regularly kept in contact with, including Tillie Olsen, Maxine Kumin, and Sylvia Plath (*Anne* Middlebrook 196). Women were no longer discouraged from writing poetry altogether. However, they did face a special sort of bias that men did not. Women writers were expected to follow the male writing tradition, and could be subject to criticism if they chose to break these norms. Anne Sexton rejected this idea, saying: "As long as it can be said about a woman writer, 'She writes like a man' and that woman takes it as a compliment, we are in trouble" (*Anne* Middlebrook 173). Sexton ignored the male traditions of literature, and chose to define her own literary path. She was praised by fellow writer Sylvia Plath, who said Sexton's work was "womanly in the greatest sense, and so blessedly un-literary" (*Anne* Middlebrook 174). Anne Sexton's work was praised, even by fellow poets, for breaking the rigid norms set by male tradition.

Though Anne Sexton was loved for her unconventional poetry, she was criticized for it too. Her tendency to write about female sexuality was looked at by critics of her time as “just trivial and embarrassing” (Pollitt). Another topic Sexton spent considerable time on was the physical female body. This was an unusual thing to do at the time, and it was not well received in the literary world. A review published in *The New York Times Book Reviews* said of Sexton: “It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experiences” (qtd. in *Sexton Middlebrook* 173). Sexton was also criticized for the way she wrote about her emotions. Her poetry was condemned by critics for being overly-emotional and sentimental (*Sexton Middlebrook* 173). Another complaint lobbied against Sexton is that she was a narcissist, because she wrote primarily about herself and her own experiences. One critic even went so far as to complain that in Sexton’s writing she was “telling all in an exposé of her innermost workings that amounts to literary *seppuku* [ritual suicide]” (qtd. in Ostriker 251). All this criticism reflects the idea that women should keep their experiences about their bodies and emotions to themselves. Sexton was labeled narcissistic and self-destructive simply for daring to share these experiences.

Anne Sexton’s treatment of the female body in her writing was unprecedented in the literary world. She did not romanticize or demonize it; she presents it in a graphically realistic way. A perfect example of this is her poem “Woman with Girdle,” which is a simple poem about an older woman putting on her girdle for the day. It uses graphic, honest language to describe her body, opening with the lines:

Your midriff sags toward your knees;  
 your breasts lie down in air,  
 their nipples as uninvolved  
 as warm starfish (Sexton lines 1-4).

The descriptions of the woman's body only go on to get more graphic from here. Sexton describes in vivid detail the woman's body hair and surgical scars. Sexton ends the poem saying, "straightaway from God you have come / into your redeeming skin" (lines 26-27). By referring to the woman's skin as "redeeming," Sexton shows that there is nothing disgusting or wrong with the woman. She is simply in her natural state. This kind of poetry was challenging people on their preconceived notions of what poetry should be about.

A blunt depiction of the body is also present in Sexton's poem "The Operation." In this poem, Sexton describes a woman who is having surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. She continues to use extremely unsentimental descriptions of the body, even going so far as to say "the body is meat" (Sexton line 44). It is a very brutally honest depiction of surgery and its effects on the body. Sexton uses mostly mundane descriptions, like when she compares stitching on the body to stitching on a football:

Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty  
back the frightened way she came  
and run along, Anne, and run along now,  
my stomach laced like a football  
for the game (lines 119-123).

By comparing the woman to Humpty-Dumpty, a fictional broken egg, Sexton is emphasizing the fragility of the body. Rather than a romanticized view of the female body, in this poem Sexton paints a graphic picture of a fragile and flawed human body. It was writing like "Woman with Girdle" and "The Operation" that made literary critics uncomfortable with Sexton's work, and caused them to deem Sexton's writing as overly focused on the biological.

Sexton also used her poetry to define her own life experiences, which is what caused people to accuse her of narcissism and excessive self-revelation (Ostriker 251). One autobiographical poem of Sexton's is "Housewife." This is a very short poem, yet still manages

to be touching as Sexton describes the entrapment that housewives feel. Sexton herself was a housewife until she began writing poetry for a career, and she used this poem to express how trapped she felt in her experience (*Housewife into Poet* Middlebrook 483). “Housewife” talks about the unescapable commitment of a housewife to both her husband and the house she keeps. The poem ends with the lines: “A woman is her mother. / That's the main thing” (Sexton lines 9-10), and thus connecting the physical entrapment of the housewife to a deeper generational plight. Sexton, like many other women, felt like history was repeating itself when she became a housewife just like her mother. Sexton takes the most traditionally feminine thing, a housewife, and shows that it worth writing about. She does this while critiquing her society that makes it difficult for a woman to pursue a career outside of the home.

Another poem of Sexton’s that goes even further into self-revelation is “Wanting to Die,” where she carefully articulates her continual struggles with mental health. Sexton attempted suicide many times in her life, and would eventually succeed in taking her life in 1974 (*Anne Sexton* Middlebrook 379). She documents her suicidal tendencies and attempts in her poem “Wanting to Die.” Sexton talks about how she often feels the urge to die, calling it “the almost unnamable lust” (line 3). She tells of her two suicide attempts, how they failed, and how she feels like the urge will never leave her:

and yet she waits for me, year after year,  
to so delicately undo an old wound,  
to empty my breath from its bad prison (Sexton lines 25-27).

It’s an intimate look at Sexton’s constant struggle with mental health and suicide. Sexton’s poem is so brutally honest that it is understandable why it may make the reader uncomfortable. It is unusual to read a poem where the author reveals her deepest darkest urges. However, it was a normal for Sexton to write poems like “Wanting to Die,” where she openly talks about her

personal matters. “Wanting to Die” is one of many of these personal poems that led to Sexton being labeled an over-sharing narcissist.

Anne Sexton is remembered more for the content of her poetry, rather than their form. Poetic scholar, Alicia Ostriker, sums up Anne Sexton poetry by saying, “She is not a fine artist...Musically her instrument is the kazoo...And yet the writing dazzles” (Ostriker 253). Even when Sexton is being praised, she is still being accused of not fitting in with the formal literary tradition. Yet, her “dazzling” writing maintains her legacy as one of the great confessional poets (*Housewife into Poet* Middlebrook 501). Her work is frequently included in anthologies and taught in high schools and colleges (*Anne Sexton* Middlebrook 402). It is a great triumph to have poetry about women’s experiences being widely read, when it was originally accused of being narcissistic and inappropriate. Anne Sexton’s dramatic change from housewife into poet led to a poetic career where she defined herself through honesty and self-revelation.

## VI. **Sylvia Plath**

Sylvia Plath is a poet known both for her striking poetry and her tragic death. Her work is mostly grouped with her contemporary confessional poets, like Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton. However, her range is much broader than that of her peers, and sometimes defies categorization at all (Nelson 27). Her most famous works are the poems included in the collection *Ariel*, most of which she wrote in the two months leading up to her suicide. Haunting and personal, *Ariel* was published after her death, and was called by scholar Leonard Sanazaro “some of the most controversial and widely read poetry of the twentieth century” (87). Sylvia Plath’s success lasted long after her death, with one of her post-humous poetry collections being awarded the Pulitzer prize (Sanazaro 87). Controversial in her life, and her death, Sylvia Plath remains a popular poet in the twenty-first century.

Sylvia Plath is the first woman included here who had the benefit of a formal literary education. She attended Smith College on a scholarship to study English. She excelled academically and received many opportunities to publish her work (Wagner-Martin 61). During this time, Plath wrote in her journals that she was upset about the prospect of having to choose between marriage and her writing career. This was a choice most girls of her time were faced with, but Plath wanted both (Wagner-Martin 65). When she graduated Smith in 1955, Plath was offered a Fulbright Fellowship to study literature at Cambridge University in England. It was here that she would meet and marry fellow poet, Ted Hughes (Fromm 246). She did so before the completion of the second year of her studies. According to a local newspaper this was unusual because Cambridge “frowns on married women students” (“The London/American”). Plath’s formal training would be an asset to her as she began her short, but prolific, poetry career.

In an interview with Peter Orr, Sylvia Plath explained her preferred topics of poetry. She said that she was excited by “peculiar, private, and taboo subjects” (Orr 168). She cited as inspiration the poems Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell wrote about their mental breakdowns. Sylvia Plath is open that her poems are often about her personal experiences, telling the interviewer: “my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have” (Orr 169). However, unlike Anne Sexton, Plath’s writing was not always clearly autobiographical. She talks about “manipulating” her personal experiences to turn them into a poem that takes on larger ideas. Critics still took note of autobiographical experiences woven into her poetry. There was often a consensus that the poetry of Sylvia Plath was good, but she was overly concerned with herself. In a review for *The Gazette*, literary critic, Donald Johnson, compliments Plath’s poetry but condemns her “preoccupation with death and self” (Johnson). Similarly, Pete Davison applauds Plath’s poetic technique, but wishes she would have “set down

her autobiographical crises” (Davison). Though they liked her poems, critics were uncomfortable with Plath’s tendency towards autobiography. This echoes the issues that Anne Sexton faced, where critics thought a woman’s experiences should be kept to herself.

Another point of contention in Sylvia Plath’s work was the way femininity was portrayed. One critic, David Holbrook, was struck by the sexual undertones often present in Plath’s poetry. In a response to this he says, “Sylvia Plath could scarcely find anything within her that was feminine at all...she is sadly pseudo-male” (qtd. in Rose 19). This attack bears obvious similarities to the accusation that Aphra Behn was a hermaphrodite, because of her uncouth writing style. Another critic, Pauline Dubkin, says of Plath’s poetry: “only in their hystericality, that sometimes rises to shrillness, can they be called ‘feminine’” (Dubkin). In Dubkin’s review, Sylvia Plath exists in a kind of feminine limbo. Her poetry itself is not feminine enough, yet the tone she takes is that of a shrill woman. Another critic, Paul West, wants to base Sylvia Plath’s success on her feminine beauty. He says of her: “Had Sylvia Plath been ugly, I wonder if she would have the standing she has” (West 48). Critics seem to disagree on whether Sylvia Plath was too feminine, not feminine enough, or somehow both, but they all have reached the conclusion Sylvia Plath was being a woman in the wrong way.

In certain poems, Sylvia Plath uses fictional situations to define her own experiences and feelings. This is extremely clear in her unpublished poem “Complaint of the Crazy Queen,” which she sent in a letter home to her mother. The poem, on its surface, is the story of a queen in a fantasy land whose kingdom is intruded upon by a strange man. However, it is really a thinly veiled description of the relationship between Plath and Ted Hughes. First the queen is simply unhappy with his presence in her land: “My dainty acres he ramped through / and used my gentle

doves with manner's rude" (Plath lines 6-7). The queen confronts the intruder, only to begin a relationship with him:

he took some pity upon my crying;  
of rich attire  
he made my shoulders bare  
and solaced me, but quit me at cock's crowing (Plath lines 17-20)

This poem was included in a letter from Plath to her mother, shortly after she met Hughes. The accompanying letter detailed Sylvia Plath's fears about the way Ted Hughes used and then abandoned women (Plath). Though this poem takes place in a fairy-tale world, it is still autobiographical. Plath uses this fantasy world to express her real-world feeling about her budding relationship with Ted Hughes.

Sylvia Plath's poem "The Jailer" is similar in its autobiographical techniques. This poem was written later, after Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had separated following Hughes's infidelity. "The Jailer" is a violent poem about a kidnapped woman who bemoans the violence she suffers at the hands of her captor: "I have been drugged and raped. / Seven hours knocked out of my right mind" (Plath *lines* 6-7). As the speaker goes on to talk more about how she's feeling, rather than strictly what has happened, it becomes clearer that Plath is channeling the way she feels mistreated by Ted Hughes. She says of the man:

I imagine him  
Impotent as distant thunder,  
In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.  
I wish him dead or away.  
That, it seems, is the impossibility (Plath lines 40-44).

It can be seen in her letters home that Plath was distraught after her husband moved out. She worried about how she would take care of two young children, while also supporting herself (Wagner-Martin 218). "The Jailer" expresses the rage Plath felt towards Hughes. When read in an autobiographical light, "The Jailer" is extremely unflattering to Hughes. The poem is

noticeably missing from Plath's final collection *Ariel*, which was assembled by Hughes after Plath's death. Ted Hughes faced criticism for this, since many people saw it as him trying to censor Plath posthumously (Rose 65). Despite Hughes's attempts to keep it private, "The Jailer" is still a popular poem of Plath's where readers can see her clearly defining her own emotions and experiences.

Plath documents her experiences most vividly in her poem "Lady Lazarus." In this poem, she writes about the three times she has almost died. By naming it "Lady Lazarus" she connects herself to the biblical figure whom Jesus resurrected from the dead. Despite this obvious allusion, there is no other story present. Unlike the other two poems mentioned above, "Lady Lazarus" has no separate surface meaning; it is a purely auto-biographical look at Plath's brushes with death. She opens the poem, "I have done it again. / One year in every ten" (lines 1-2). The poem continues as Plath details a childhood accident and an occasion where she attempted suicide during her college years. She does not show any fear of death, even approaching it with a sense of humor: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well" (Plath lines 42-45). Plath provides an unflinching look at her experiences with death. The poem becomes even more personal when taken in the context that Plath killed herself a few months after she wrote "Lady Lazarus."

Sylvia Plath's poems could be about fantasy kingdoms or kidnapping victims, but she still found a way to infuse her own emotions into them. She did not flinch from honestly portraying her own experiences. Critics applauded her mastery of poetic form, but were uncomfortable with the way she injected her own experience into them. Her femininity also came under attack. Undeterred, Plath continued to write and publish poetry describing her

experiences with men and brushes with death. Her poetry allowed her to define her own experiences and feelings.

## VII. Conclusions

As I mentioned in the introduction, and has been clear in the lives of all these women, women were frequently discouraged from engaging in intellectual pursuits. Gerda Lerner sums this up when she says, “For many centuries the talents of women were directed not toward self-development but toward realizing themselves through the development of a man” (Lerner 11). For a woman to write at all in this kind of culture is a victory. This is especially true for the female poets of this project who all chose to write about female experiences. To spend time detailing female experience is a total rejection of the idea that women live only to serve others. Poetry about women’s experiences says that women’s experiences matter, and they are worth recording and reading about. This contradicts the patriarchal conventions that say women’s experiences do not matter, because they exist merely to serve men. The poetry of these five women all show the meaning and importance of women’s experiences.

Anne Bradstreet, Aphra Behn, Forough Farrokhzad, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath are all very different writers, but they all faced obstacles to their writing because of their gender. Anne Bradstreet, the first published poet of the new world, wrote poignant poems defining herself through her experiences as a wife and mother in the new world. Next came the outspoken Aphra Behn who boldly responded to the sexism she saw present in her time, and never hesitated to resist the patriarchal norms for women of her time. This obviously differs from Anne Bradstreet, who chose to write define herself through the traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother. Despite being separated by a greater time period, Aphra Behn has more in common with Forough Farrokhzad. They both openly wrote about female sexuality in a way that resulted in

harsh criticism from their respective societies. Farrokhzad's open and confessional poetry also bears clear resemblance to the style of Sylvia Plath. Like Farrokhzad, Plath wrote poetry that detailed her own life experiences. These similarities can be seen in Farrokhzad's poem "Captive" and Plath's poem "The Jailer," where they each describe traumatic romantic relationships they have with men. Another poet of the confessional style is Anne Sexton, who like the other women, wrote autobiographical poetry. Unlike Sylvia Plath, Sexton received no formal literary education and was criticized for the way she broke literary norms. In contrast, Sylvia Plath was hailed as an accomplished poet, but criticized for using her poetry to express her experiences. All these women are unique writers, but they share the same bold dedication to using their poetry to personally define themselves and their experiences, despite any criticism they may have faced.

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