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Deanna Fernie

*The Difficult Homages of  
Berryman and Bradstreet*

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Deanna Fernie

## The Difficult Homages of Berryman and Bradstreet

‘mistress neither of fiery nor velvet verse’<sup>1</sup>

John Berryman’s *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953) is a curious kind of homage. Berryman dismisses Bradstreet’s poetry, exclaiming, ‘[A]ll this bald / abstract didactic rhyme I read appalled’ (stanza 12, lines 5–6). Later he has Bradstreet herself lament how the ‘proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate’ (42.6), a sentiment which echoes her admission of defeat at line three thousand five hundred and sixty four of ‘The Four Monarchies’<sup>2</sup>. Her physical person is equally unprepossessing: ‘pockmarked and westward standing on a haggard deck’ (4.5) she appears to him in his vision, her ‘cratered skin’ like her ‘Palissey ewer’,<sup>3</sup> as he later has her refer to it (28.1), corresponding to her poetry’s lack of smoothness and beauty. The picture Berryman presents of this seventeenth century poet is of a writer commanding neither the fire of the great Renaissance

1. John Berryman, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, stanza 12, line 8. The poem first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1953, and then in book form published by Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956. All subsequent references are to this edition.
2. ‘And weary lines (though lank) I many penned’, line 3,564 of ‘The Four Monarchies’ in Jeannine Hensley, ed., *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1967) 178. All subsequent references are to this edition of Bradstreet.
3. Berryman compares her pockmarked appearance to the grotesque pottery of Bernard Palissey (c. 1510–1550); but John Haffenden points out that Bradstreet was fully cured from her bout of smallpox, apparently without scarring. See *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 10, 186 note 27, in which Haffenden cites John Harvard Ellis’s *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Gloucester: 1962) 5.