

The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Sean Andres on: "If I Had Made the World" by Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt

ER: This is your host, Elizabeth Renker, on September 20, 2023, speaking with you from Columbus, Ohio. I want to mention that one of the requests we had from listeners in response to season one of the podcast is that we spend a little more time reading poems of Sarah's aloud and talking about them, explaining interpretations and so on. So, we're adding some more short episodes of that kind to season two. I'm very pleased today to be introducing a reading by our recent guest, Sean Andres, of Sarah's terrific poem, "If I Had Made the World."

I just want to say a little about this poem by way of context before I turn things over to Sean's interpretation. I want to mention, first of all, that when we talk about poems it's very important to think about the context. By the context, I mean both when was the poet writing and what do we know about why they were writing this particular poem at this particular time? And, if the poet is writing for an audience, when and where is the poem appearing? And how is it affecting the people who are reading it--who are reading it in print or who are reading it aloud to others who are hearing it read aloud? Poems had a wide-spread life as an oral form of art in the 19th century. So, I want to provide a little bit of background about "If I Had Made the World."

This poem was first printed in a very important political newspaper in Washington D.C., called *The Capital* - and it's the capital *al*, not the capitol *ol* - *The Capital*. *The Capital* was edited by Donn Piatt. That's the name Donn with two *n*'s on it; an odd spelling, often turns up wrong, but it's Donn with two *n*'s. Donn Piatt was a cousin of Sarah's husband, J.J. So, Sarah was in a very intimate social network with Donn Piatt, and Donn frequently published poems of Sarah's in *The Capital*. There are a number of reasons why that's important and I'm going to talk about that a little bit more to help you understand this. But I want to mention first of all that *The Capital*, even as important a paper as it was, is very, very rare. It's very hard to find any existing

print copies of *The Capital* anywhere, even in the best newspaper collections in the world, the best libraries in the world. It just did not survive. However, we at The Ohio State University have the *Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project*, which is a project free for public access. You can consult this site at any time, no passwords, no fees, etc. It's public and free. We were able to borrow [it] through a generous loan from the Piatt family - Margaret Piatt out at Piatt Castle in West Liberty, Ohio, loaned to us her extensive collection of *The Capital*, which remained in the family. We at Ohio State have digitized it, free, for public access. This is the only place in the world you can find every existing issue of *The Capital* and read it. And you can do it free. So, all you need to do to find it is do a Google search for the *Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project*. When you go there, you will see all the various resources we have collected for readers to learn more about Sarah or do research on Sarah, and you will see there is a link there for a page called *The Capital*. You can go there and you can scroll through every single issue.

Now, if you'd like to see this poem in its original context, you will go to the November 5, 1876 issue of *The Capital*, where the poem appears at the top left corner of page two. Now, there are a few other things I want to say about how this poem looks in the paper that help you understand the context. First of all, at the top right, above the title, it says, "For The Capital" – that phrase. What that means is that this is the first printing of the poem. It has never appeared anywhere before. This was a distinction for papers or magazines--to be the first ones to run a particular poem, especially by a well-known poet, and Sarah was very well-known by this time in her career. So, it's being printed for the first time in this issue of *The Capital*. Also, Sarah's name doesn't appear on the poem. There's no by-line that says "By Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt," or any of her other names – Mrs. Piatt, Sarah M. B. Piatt. We've talked about that in other episodes: married women poets often had multiple names, and it can be very confusing to track their careers for that reason. Anyway, her name is not on this poem. Okay. So, how do we

know it's by her? We know because Donn, as the editor, did something else that was typical of the time. He simply flagged the fact that he had this great poem by this very, very well-known poet by mentioning some of her other work. So, under the title, "If I Had Made the World," you see the phrase "By the author of *A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles*" etc. So, he's referring to a recent volume of her poems published as a book that was well-known. So, everybody knows: oh, this is by Sarah Piatt. So, that is how we know this is Sarah's poem, and these are some of the different clues you see in the paper that show you what point in Sarah's career are we stepping into when we read this poem.

All right. Other very important clues in the details of publication: remember I said this is the issue of *The Capital* published on November 5, 1876. Sarah's in Donn's social network; this is a poem she can get into print very fast. She doesn't have to send it out for publication to someone far away and wait and hear if they're ever going to use it. Donn gets it in print immediately. All right, November 5, 1876. Tuesday, November 7, 1876, was election day; the famed election between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden. This is now one of the most famous presidential elections in American history because it was among the most contested presidential elections. Okay. You're going to hear Sean talk about the politics of this poem. You can hear in the poem when Sean reads it, you can hear Sarah's disgust with politics, her sarcasm about politics and her disgust and sarcasm not only with politics, but with power. It's really important to think about that when you listen to this poem and you think about this context. It's appearing two days before the presidential election in Washington D.C. in a notoriously political newspaper. Donn was one of the most famous journalists of his age. His name has really fallen from history but if you go back into the 19th-century discussions in the public sphere, he was extraordinarily well-known. Think about what that means about this poem as a political poem.

Now, I'll mention two other things before handing the mic over to Sean. First of all, as was often the case with Sarah's poems, this poem, even though it first appeared in this newspaper, would later be published in one of the collections of Sarah's poems published as a volume. So, if you wanted to read it in its later book form, you could go to Google Books and search for her book, *Poems in Company with Children*, published in 1877, and you would find the poem reprinted there. But think about the difference between reading it in the book and seeing the immediate context two days before the presidential election in a political newspaper, and you see why it's so important to think about that first printing.

Second of all, if you've listened to some of the other interviews in the podcast you've noticed I often asked people what was their starter poem, or what was their gateway poem. These are phrases I often use with people who have gotten very interested in Sarah because it's a common phenomenon when people find Sarah--become electrified by Sarah's work--that there's a particular poem they read and they just feel stunned and captivated and they never turn back. If you, for example, listen to the interview conducted with me by my colleague here at Ohio State, the Special Collections Curator Jolie Braun, I mention that my starter poem was "The Palace Burner." Sean's starter poem was "If I Had Made the World," and that's why that's the poem he's reading for us today. I hope you will really enjoy listening to his reading as well as some of the other new episodes we'll be doing in this style.

SA: This is Sean Andres reading "If I Had Made the World" by Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt.

If I had made the world — ah me!
 I might have left some things undone!
 But as to *him* — my boy, you see,
 A pretty world this would be,
 I'd say, without George Washington!

Would I have made the Baby? Oh,
 There were no need of anything

Without the Baby, you must know!
 —— I'm a Republican, and so
 I never would have made "the King."

I might have made the President —
 Had I known how to make him right!
 —— Columbus? Yes, if I had meant
 To find a flowering continent
 Already made for me, I might.

I would have made one poet too —
 Has God made more? —— Yes, I forgot,
 There is no need of asking you;
 You know as little as I do.
 A poet is — well, who knows what?

And yet a poet is, my dear,
 A man who writes a book like this,
 (There never *was* but one, I hear;)
 —— Yes, it is hard to spell S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e.
 So, now, Good-night — and here's a kiss.

You are not tired? — you want to know
 What else I would have made? Not much:
 A few white lambs that would not grow;
 Some violets that would stay; some snow
 Not quite too cold for you to touch.

I'd not have taught my birds to fly;
 My deepest seas would not be deep! —
 My highest mountains hardly high;
 My deserts full of dates should lie —
 But why will you not go to sleep?

I'd *not* have made the wind, because
 It's made of — nothing. Never mind.
 Nor any white bears — they have claws;
 (Nor "Science," no, nor "Nature's laws!")
 Nor made the North Pole hard to find!

I'd *not* have made the monkeys — (then
 No one could ever prove to me
 There ever was a season when
 All these fine creatures we call men
 Hung chattering in some tropic tree!)

Once more, Good-night. This time you hear?
 Please hear as well my morning call.
 —— Yes, first I'll tell you something queer:
 If I had made the world, I fear —

I'd not have made the world at all!¹

So, there's something that struck me when I read this first, which is why it was my "conversion poem," the one that made me fall in love with her - especially in the context of women poets in anthologies, because this was back in 2006 when I read this and she was new to anthologies really. We basically, at that time, were going from Anne Bradstreet to Emily Dickinson and really not many women in between included. But here, this new woman included pops up, and the variety of topics she brings up are deeply controversial to when it was written in the 1870's. I'd never read a dialogue poem like this before, not where you infer what the other's dialogue is and usually it's not even a child's.

So, on the surface level you get this intimate conversation between mother and child during bedtime when there are stories and natural curiosity - just raw, real questions. To me, this is a poem about Manifest Destiny - about power in the narratives, the myths we tell ourselves to comfort us when we go to bed at night. Here we might infer that the story read before the poem was a creation story from the Bible. For a fleeting moment, the narrator is genuinely asked how she would have made the world if she were God. I think Sarah - the way she talks about God and Christianity is unlike anything of the time, especially for a woman, to criticize or imagine power like that, the power to shape worlds, to mold man. So immediately, we set the stage of what she would do with the power to rewrite history, starting off with the thing she dislikes most: war. This country was founded on war and its first president was a so-called war hero, George Washington, who took ruthless tactics to kill, assimilate, and remove native people.

¹ Sarah M. B. Piatt, *Poems in Company with Children* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Co., 1877), 52-55.

Then immediately following that, you have the narrator referring to Jesus as a baby, that innocence that comes with it, and in that same stanza, you can make your own threads between the lines of the first line to the last. You have this line that could be interpreted as yet about Jesus, who is often referred to in Christianity as the “King” - but also divine right, that God put his king on the throne. Then simply the king, as in monarchy, with the narrator proclaiming herself Republican. But then, you also have the layer of equating adult Jesus as a king, of which she disapproves. So, there are these complexities that force all these tangled webs of centuries long systems of oppression into one stanza. By the time you’ve finished it, you’re thinking: what just happened here? What is she saying?

So, you have to reread it and this whole time you’re just needling all these threads. So, then you return to the president. Whether she’s referring to the office of the president in general or President Grant, who was in office at the time, is up in the air. So, yes, she’s a Republican, but no president has been perfect; they’ve all been disappointing to her. She doesn’t have the solutions either. She will readily admit that. But then she goes on to talk about how Columbus did not mean to find the Americas and that they were not made for him. She is absolutely demolishing the American myth of supremacy via Manifest Destiny. To me, this is very much a sequel to “The Indian’s Inquiry.”

Then she pulls in this irony of talking about poets and defining them, the reader knowing that she is one, but her being humble and not admitting it. That’s a very Sarah thing to do. And a very woman thing to do at the time, right? You cannot admit you have a job, at least if you’re a lady. So then, here’s the bold thing: this idea of referring to a poet as someone who writes a book, like the Bible. But there’s only one poet: Shakespeare. So, you have to recognize that she’d just read a Bible verse, to know that she’s blaspheming right now, elevating Shakespeare above God’s word. That is kind of

revolutionary when you think about it, and shocking if you're reading that and put that together.

Then there's a twist. She thought she was done, but the child wasn't. The child wasn't ready for bed, has more questions. So, she has two sets of ironic twists in this, because usually she just has the one, near the end or at the end. But, because she thought she was at the end, she has two - one in the middle and one at the end. She's using that classic Shakespeare element, perfected in his last stanza of his sonnets. So, she's getting a little meta here, with Shakespeare being the ultimate poet, but then she's replicating his style, and of course she's a poet too.

It's curious, when she continues on. When she's describing how she would make the world, and she wants it all at her fingertips. She wants the highest mountains lower; she wants to be able to climb them. She wants the deepest seas not so deep; she wants them shallow so she can swim in them, she can see the bottom of the ocean. She wants to travel it. She's a woman in this world and being a woman in the world you cannot travel it like a man. So, for Sarah herself, she is limited by the confines of her sex and limited income.

She wants no danger, no secrets, no mysteries. She wants a safe, sweet, and beautiful world, and she wants that for her children. She'd not have science or nature's laws which counter the myths we tell ourselves through religion, through legends, through lies. This was a time when Darwin was traveling the world to lecture on evolutionary theory. And indeed, she's easily accepted the proof that men hung in trees like chattering monkeys in the distant past. It's very easy for her to connect that. It's really the only thing she's accepted about the current state of things, aside from Shakespeare.

So, when she's done, she leaves you with the chilling thought that she'd not have made the world at all. Then you reflect on why, after reading it. It's far too flawed. Men would just muck it up with their violence and corruption. Then it prompts another read-through, because that's what Sarah's poems do.