



Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

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Poet; Autobiographer; Colonist; Dissenter; Letter-writer/ Diarist; Man/ Woman of Letters; Satirist; Scholar.
Active 1650-1672 in United States

Seldom does a writer begin more than one literary tradition, but Anne Bradstreet, Puritan and poet, begins two. She is the first poet and the first woman writer in the British colonies to be published. When her first volume of poetry *the Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) was published, Bradstreet's poetry was praised on both continents. This was also the case after the posthumous publication of the second volume, *Several Poems* (1678). Although Bradstreet was not much read in the two succeeding centuries, her poetry was rediscovered in the 1960s as part of the new focus on women's writing and continues to garner much critical attention. The breadth of Bradstreet's scholarship, the depth of her humor, the mastery of her poetic lines, and the intensity of her passion for her husband and children have kept alive the interest in her work and have led scholars to re-evaluate Puritanism and women's role in it.

Anne Bradstreet was born into a dissenting family in Northamptonshire, England in 1612 or 1613 to Dorothy Yorke and Thomas Dudley, both of the gentry. Dudley's employment as manager of the estate of the Earl of Lincoln, at Sempringham, gave Bradstreet access not only to her father's library but to the much superior holdings of the Earl. Raised in the Earl's household, amid a progressive, aristocratic atmosphere, Bradstreet learned to love classic literature, both Roman and Greek, as well as philosophy, medicine, astronomy, French and English literature, and natural science. Even as Bradstreet steeped herself in the aristocratic, classical tradition, she was being imbued with the reformist ideas of the Puritans: Anne Hutchinson lived nearby, and the great Puritan preacher John Cotton was vicar at a famous church in Boston, Lincolnshire when the family moved there.

For Bradstreet, two major events happened when she was sixteen: first a bout of smallpox, which she contracted in about 1628, and shortly afterward her marriage to Simon Bradstreet, who in 1621, when Bradstreet was nine, joined the household in Sempringham and worked with her father until the Dudley's moved to nearby Boston in 1624. Simon Bradstreet later left the Earl of Lincoln to work for the Dowager Countess of Warwick, in whose household Simon and Anne lived until they left for America. Although, as Bradstreet told her children later in life, her "heart rose" at the prospect of moving from her comfortable home in England to the rough wilderness of America, she didn't refuse to go, and in the spring of 1630, the Dudley's and the Bradstreet's sailed to the Massachusetts Bay Colony aboard the *Arbella*, with John Winthrop, the colony's first governor. On July 12, 1630, Anne Bradstreet, seventeen years old, arrived in Salem, where she lived for a short time, until setting out to the less populous Newtowne (later Cambridge) and then to Ipswich, where Bradstreet lived for ten years and wrote the poems that made up her first volume of poetry.

“Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno 1632” was written in Newtowne shortly after Bradstreet recovered, when she was nineteen years old. This, her first poem, shows an acceptance of illness and even death at God’s hand. The illness was a turning point in her life: after it she came to see herself as a poet in God’s service. Later, Bradstreet would write of her religious doubts, a tension that underlies many of her mature poems, yet the poetry always comes back to an expression of faith. The illness of 1632, like the smallpox earlier, seemed to Bradstreet to be God’s way of correcting her when she strayed. In Ipswich, beginning in 1635, Bradstreet took on the life of a Puritan woman, running a household and bearing many children – eight births between 1633 and 1652. However, Bradstreet broke the woman’s role by writing an amazing amount of poetry. Her most prolific years in Ipswich were 1641-1643, during which she wrote personal poetry, much of which was published after her death, as well as hundreds of pages of poetry on more public topics. She was encouraged in her writing by her father, who wrote poetry himself, and, although Ipswich was considered a frontier town, being thirty miles from Boston, Bradstreet could interact with other inhabitants who had education, knew the world, and approved of her writing.

Some of the earliest of Bradstreet’s poems are elegies, for Sir Philip Sydney (1638), a relation through her father’s family, for Du Bartas (1641), a French writer who had tremendous influence on her, and for Queen Elizabeth I (1643). These poems show Bradstreet’s political acumen, her feminist position on the role of women, and her growing ability to control language. The writing is more classical than it is Puritan, being written in rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter, with metaphysical word play. The tone of the poems is playful, even if the attitude toward the person being praised is admiring. In “In honour of Queen Elizabeth”, Bradstreet argues that Elizabeth had been a better queen than many a man had been king and that she represented the potential of all women: “She hath wip’d off th’ aspersion of her Sex, / That women wisdom lack to play the Rex”. To the scholars who try to prove that women are inferior, Bradstreet writes, “But can you Doctors now this point dispute, / She’s argument enough to make you mute”. The poem goes on to compare Elizabeth to other women leaders, like Semiramus and Cleopatra, and challenges men to dare question her authority:

Nay Masculines, you have thus tax’d us long,
But she though dead, will vindicate our wrong.
Let such, as say our sex is void of reason,
Know ‘tis a slander now, but once was treason.”

At Ipswich, Bradstreet read history and kept up with the latest scientific theories, then used her wide knowledge in her four-part poems, called collectively her quaternions. In imitation of the seventeenth-century poet Guillaume de Salluste Sieur Du Bartas, whose “Divine Weeks” had appeared in translation in 1621, and partly in imitation of her father who wrote a quaternion of his own, Bradstreet completed four quaternions in the 1640s: “The Four Elements” (1641-1643), “The Four Humours” (1641-1643), “The Four Ages of Man” (1643), and “The Four Seasons” (1643). In addition, she wrote 3500 lines of “The Four Monarchies”, an exhaustive Bible history that covers the Assyrian, the Persian, and the Greek lines of succession, and begins the Roman. Bradstreet later tried to finish the poem, but the new section was lost in a fire.

“The Four Humours” is set up as an argument among four sisters about which humor (choler, blood, bile, or phlegm) is most important. The argument is often comic and demonstrates Bradstreet’s understanding of both physiology and female psychology. Choler begins the argument by claiming that she is more potent than any of the other three:

Here’s three of you, all sees now what you are,
Then yeeld to me, preheminance in War.
Again, who sits, for learning, science, Arts?
Who rarifies the intellectuall parts?

Whence flow fine spirits, and witty notions?
Not from our dul slow Sisters motions.

Critics have noted the female personae in many of Bradstreet's poems, whether sister, daughter, mother, or wife. Here the female voice is sprightly and assertive, appropriate for Choler. Bradstreet continues the poem through all the voices, each sister clearly separate from the other. For "The Four Monarchies", Bradstreet relied on Sir Walter Raleigh's five-volume history of the world. The long poem often focuses on grisly scenes and strong women to keep the interest high.

The Ipswich years were spent not only on the overwhelming project of the quaternions, but on several shorter poems and "A Dialogue between Old England and New" (1642), which personifies England and America as mother and daughter. The mother is sick and the daughter wishes to suggest a cure: Puritanism. In this poem, unlike in the quaternions, Bradstreet's Puritan reform spirit speaks clearly. New England says to old:

Your griefs I pity much, but should do wrong,
To weep for that we both have pray'd for long,
To see these latter dayes of hop'd for good,
That Right may have its right, though't be with blood.

Again the poetic voice is female, although the topic is more normally considered masculine. Bradstreet isn't afraid to make her political stance plain and doesn't quail at the thought of "blood".

During the time that Bradstreet was writing her quaternions, she wrote four marriage poems as love-letters to her husband. The often-anthologized "To my Dear and loving Husband" opens with these powerful lines: "If ever two were one, then surely we. / If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee". This is poetry at its most personal. Two other letters lament her husband's absence by using metaphysical conceits. In one, the poem's speaker compares the absent husband to the sun in its relationship to the Zodiac: "I wish my Sun may never set, but burn/ Within the Cancer of my glowing breast". In another the husband is compared to Phoebus Apollo. A third poem, simply called "Another", uses word play throughout: dear/deer and heart/hart. The first line, "As loving Hind that (Hartless) wants her Deer", begins a wonderful interweaving of conceits, with the woman compared to a hind, a fish, and a dove in succession, brought together passionately at the end:

I here, he there, alas, both kept by force:
Return my Dear, my joy, my only Love,
Unto thy Hinde, thy Mullet and thy Dove.

Different from these poems, also written in this period, is the "Prologue," a poem feminist scholars have focused on as evidence of the discrimination that Bradstreet must have faced as a woman writing in Puritan times:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue,
Who sayes, my hand a needle better fits,
A Poets Pen, all scorne, I should thus wrong;
For such despite they cast on female wits:
If what I doe prove well, it wo'nt advance,
They'l say its stolne, or else, it was by chance.

All of these poems were circulated among family and friends, without Bradstreet intending for them to go any further. However, in 1650, her brother-in-law John Woodbridge gathered some of them and had them published in England, where the book was well received. The publication included the quaternions, the

dialogue between old England and new, the elegies, the “Prologue”, and two short poems on religious topics; it did not include the marriage poems. *The Tenth Muse* is the first published book of poetry by an American writer.

In 1643, Bradstreet’s mother died, and sometime in the next year or two the Bradstreet family moved away from Ipswich, now the second largest settlement in the colony, to the much more remote Andover. The move marks a change in Bradstreet’s poetic style, away from the witty, classical tone and subject matter to highly serious, personal poems. In Andover, Bradstreet no longer had the intellectual companionship of her neighbors, and, from 1656 to 1657 and again in 1661 to 1662, she suffered life-threatening illnesses. Her major literary influence during this time was the psalms, in meter, as given in the Book of Common Prayer (later the Bay Psalm Book), resulting in several poems that use the psalm meter to describe the illnesses as God’s chastisement or to thank God for allowing her to recover. The poems were included in a series of notebooks that she wrote then, focusing on the times of stress and her backsliding in faith. These poems move away from the tightly-rhymed couplets and word play of her earlier work to a looser, more direct form and language. The notebooks are a source for Bradstreet’s biography and help scholars understand her as a Puritan, deep in religious struggle. Her questioning also appears in her poetry, especially in “The Flesh and the Spirit”, a debate between two sisters that harks back to the earlier work. Flesh questions Spirit’s belief in the unseen. Flesh is not a figure of dissipation, but of hard work and the innocent pleasures that come from it. Spirit says that heaven’s pleasures are better than earth’s, but that she has to fight the temptations of Flesh. Spirit is again a female voice, speaking intensely to her counterpart:

Be still thou unregenerate part,
Disturb no more my settled heart,
For I have vow’d (and so will doe)
Thee as a foe, still to pursue.

Critics read this poem as representing Bradstreet’s inner struggle. In these later years, Bradstreet also wrote poems on her own illnesses, on the many deaths in her family, including her father and mother, her daughter-in-law, and her grandchildren. Two famous poems of this time are “The Author to her Book” and “In Reference to her Children, 23, June, 1659”, which begins “I had eight birds hatcht in one nest”.

Many scholars consider Bradstreet’s “Contemplations” (1650s or 1660s) her masterwork. This meditative poem of thirty-three stanzas, praising God by looking at his works in nature, is written in a new form for her, a quatrain that sets a scene, often with beautiful imagery, followed by a triplet that comments on it. The stanza form is influenced by Spenser but the subject is more personal. Stanza 9 is representative:

I heard the merry grasshopper then sing,
The black clad Cricket, bear a second part,
They kept one tune, and plaid on the same string,
Seeming to glory in their little Art.
Shall Creatures abject, thus their voices raise?
And in their kind resound their makers praise:
Whilst I as mute, can warble forth no higher layes.

Recent interpretations of the poem see a speaker that evolves from the early stanzas to the late, moving from wonder at nature to a deeper regard for the unseen, and some critics comment on how the poem reflects Bradstreet’s growth as a poet.

In 1664, Bradstreet began writing her “Meditations Divine and Moral” in prose specifically for her son Simon. These seventy-seven aphorisms give suggestions for living well, day to day, and often involve images of

childrearing and housework as metaphors for spiritual ideas. Later in her life, Bradstreet wrote a short autobiography addressed to her children, in which she explains her spiritual growth and her belief that God sent her afflictions to make her “look home”. Here she also describes her bouts with skepticism. She questions whether she should believe in God, whether her God is a true God, and whether she should be a Puritan. Still, the letter ends in her glorifying God. Bradstreet died in 1672, six years before her *Several Poems* was published. This collection included revisions of early work as well as poetry and prose found in her papers after death.

After the two first editions of Bradstreet’s poetry, there was not another edition until John Harvard Ellis published a complete collection in 1867. The next edition didn’t appear until 1967 when Jeannine Hensley brought out the complete works with modern spelling and a foreword by poet Adrienne Rich. In 1981 Twayne published a scholarly edition of the complete works (from which the quotations here, with minor emendations, have been taken). Although earlier critics considered much of Bradstreet’s poetry imitative, since the 1960s Bradstreet’s poetry and life have been analysed and interpreted in fresh ways. The initial emphasis on her personal poems, including the five “marriage poems”, has turned to a concern with her political and philosophical poetry, with major interest in how Bradstreet balanced her feminism, her Puritan faith, and her art.

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