ANNE BRADSTREET
(1612—1672)

Sarah Gilbreath Ford

Anne Bradstreet was the first English poet in the New World. She immigrated to Massachusetts with fellow Puritans in 1630 and had her first collection of poetry, *The Tenth Muse*, published in 1650. Her poetry ranges from public topics conventional for her time, such as “The Four Ages of Man,” to intimate portraits of her life as wife and mother. These works give a modern reader views of life in the seventeenth century, the world of Puritan New England, and the experience of a woman living on the frontier. Three and a half centuries later, her work is still being read and discussed. In 1997 as part of a “Celebration of Women at Harvard College,” Harvard dedicated a gate to Anne Bradstreet. Not only was Bradstreet the poet being recognized for her work, Bradstreet the woman was in a sense returning home, as she and her family had lived on the land that later became Harvard Square. The gate has a plaque bearing her words: “I came into this country, where I found a new world and new manners at which my heart rose.” That Bradstreet’s heart originally “rose” in resistance to the prospect of living in the New World is not surprising, given that the Massachusetts colony was a barely settled community a long ocean’s voyage away from the life she knew growing up in England. Anne Bradstreet, however, eventually made the colony her home and turned the hardship of living in America into poetry.

Her poems about her life and surroundings give readers insight into Puritan society. Through her poetry, she expresses her worry when her husband is away on business, her anxiety about the possibility of dying during childbirth, her distress at being ill for long periods of time, and her grief at the loss of grandchildren. These very human reactions to life’s difficulties are then answered by Bradstreet’s faith in a God that has a hand in every detail of daily earthly existence. In essence her poetry is a primer for how faith worked for Puritans. Bradstreet also exhibits the challenge Puritans faced of living an earthly, material existence while trying to keep focus on a heavenly outcome. This conversation between “flesh and spirit,” as Bradstreet categorizes it in one poem, led the critic Ann Stanford to label her “worldly” in her book *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan*. As a Puritan, Bradstreet sees that worldliness as a fault and chides herself for it. Even when her house with all of her belongings is destroyed in a fire, she is concerned that her feelings of loss constitute vanity. This struggle between earth and heaven is at the heart of many of her poems.

Her poetry also shows us how a woman in her time period negotiated her gender role; in fact most of the criticism written on Bradstreet since the 1960s has focused on gender, as Bradstreet’s dual positions as female Puritan and female poet elicit interesting tensions and conjectures. Bradstreet was certainly aware that women in her day were not supposed to be poets, and in the poem titled “The Prologue,” she announces,

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits
A poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits....

(p. 16)

Although she softens her harangue a bit by admitting “men can do best,” she still insists on women’s ability to write poetry: “Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours” (p. 16). That “small acknowledgement” has become much larger with time. The prominent modern American poet Adrienne Rich says of Bradstreet: “To
have written poems, the first good poems in America, while rearing eight children, lying frequently sick, keeping house at the edge of wilderness, was to have managed a poet’s range and extension within confines as severe as any American poet has confronted” (p. xx). The range Bradstreet imagines she managed is rather small. At the end of “The Prologue,” Bradstreet asks for a “thyme or parsley wreath” (p. 17). She does not ask for the bay wreath of a true classical poet, but something more domestic and better suited to a Puritan mother. Writing poetry was perhaps initially Bradstreet’s way in a strange land to keep connected to the culture of her previous home, but those “good poems” ended up forging her identity in the New World both as “the tenth muse” and as America’s first poet.

LIFE

Anne Dudley Bradstreet was born in England in 1612 to Thomas and Dorothy Yorke Dudley. Little is known of Bradstreet’s mother, other than the short elegy Bradstreet penned upon her death, depicting her mother clearly if succinctly as a loving and pious Christian woman. Her father, however, was a large force both in her life and in Massachusetts politics, becoming the colony’s second governor after John Winthrop. His influence on Bradstreet is evident in the three extant poems she wrote to him: a dedication of her original collection of poetry to him, an elegy upon his death, and the poem “To Her Father with Some Verses” that uses her debt to him as an extended metaphor. In England, Thomas Dudley served as steward to the earl of Lincoln, which allowed Bradstreet to spend her childhood at the earl’s estates. Both Dudley and the earl of Lincoln were Nonconformists, and Bradstreet grew up surrounded by fervent Puritans. She explains in a letter written late in life to her children that she began around the age of six to feel guilty about sinful behavior and would often turn to scripture as comfort. At age sixteen Bradstreet was infected with smallpox, leading to a confession where she “besought the Lord and confessed my pride and vanity” (p. 263). Following her illness, she married Simon Bradstreet, her father’s assistant and a Cambridge graduate who also eventually became a powerful figure in New England, serving as a governor as well.

In 1630, two years after her marriage, Bradstreet’s family immigrated to Massachusetts on the Arbella with a group of Puritans led by John Winthrop. This small community of pilgrims envisioned themselves on a great mission to establish a church in the New World glorious enough to influence and reform the Church of England. Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered either just before the group sailed or while on their journey, details both the promises and pitfalls of their covenant with God to complete this mission. If they succeed, he says, they will be a “city on a hill” with the “eyes of all people” on their deeds, but if they fail, the “Lord will surely break out in wrath against [them]” in what Winthrop describes as a “shipwreck” (pp. 157, 158). This frightening description surely made an impact on Bradstreet and her fellow passengers, whose journey on a crowded ship for more than nine weeks entailed difficult living conditions, seasickness, and scurvy. That Bradstreet did not forget the hardships of the sea voyage is evident in her use of the image of a ship tossed at sea to describe an illness in her poem “Upon Some Distemper of Body” and in the two poems written later in life expressing great anxiety about the safety of her husband and son when they each needed to travel to England. When Winthrop’s group arrived in America, the Salem that greeted them was an overcrowded settlement with primitive buildings and scarce provisions. It is little wonder that Bradstreet’s reaction to the migration was dismay, so that her “heart rose” (p. 163).

After this challenging beginning, Anne Bradstreet and her husband established their life in America, eventually settling in Andover, Massachusetts. Her “great grief” early in the marriage was her desire for children, which, she explains, “cost me many prayers and tears,” but after five years Bradstreet’s son Samuel was born, followed by seven more children (p. 264). That she survived eight births was fortunate in a time when many women died in childbirth, and her poem “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,”
which imagines that her death might be imminent, expresses her understandable fear. Her glory in her children and her enjoyment of her role as mother is abundantly clear in her poem “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June 1659,” in which she depicts the children as eight birds who had hatched in her nest and herself as loving caretaker, teaching them to fly but sorry to see them go. The image of her marriage in her poetry is likewise positive. No fewer than nine poems are devoted to Simon Bradstreet. Several of these poems express her anxiety when he is away. In one poem she even gets a bit competitive: “If ever wife was happy in a man / Compare with me, ye women, if you can” (p. 245). These glimpses into Bradstreet’s happy domestic life are tempered by several poems written while she was ill, as she seems to have had reoccurring bouts of sickness, and the poinciant poems on the deaths of three grandchildren and a daughter-in-law.

Establishing a household in what was basically still a wilderness, albeit a “city on a hill,” and raising eight children surely kept Anne Bradstreet more than occupied. But somehow in the midst of all that she had to do, she wrote poetry. Writing poems was certainly not unusual for a Puritan. The Puritans valued literacy and were interested in writing for edification if not solely for entertainment. It was, however, unusual for women to write poetry, both in Puritan circles and in English culture (at least as far as we know by what is left in the written record). Important colonial men such as Roger Williams, Will Bradford, John Cotton, and Cotton Mather all wrote poetry (Walker, p. 257). The other well-known Puritan poet from the seventeenth century, Edward Taylor, left behind poetry that shows the usefulness of poetic verse as “meditations” on scripture and life in general, an outlet Bradstreet certainly shared in her more personal poems. Bradstreet also had family members who at least dabbled in poetry. Her sister Mercy wrote a poem to Bradstreet about her book; Bradstreet’s son wrote poems for an almanac; and her father wrote three poems that we are aware of, including one, “On the Four Parts of the World,” that inspired the quaternions in Bradstreet’s work (Hensley, p. xxvi).

Thus models existed for Bradstreet’s poetic occupations, but many men in her time were openly hostile to women writing. Even John Winthrop expressed his doubts in his notations in his journal about another literary Puritan, Anne Yale Hopkins. Hopkins was apparently exhibiting signs of a mental disorder, which Winthrop attributed to her “giving herself wholly to reading and writing,” activities “proper for men, whose minds are stronger” (quoted in Stanford 1983, p. 77). The anxiety that Bradstreet may be overstepping in adopting the role of the poet is evident in the “Epistle to the Reader” written by her brother-in-law John Woodbridge and prefacing the first edition of her poetry. Woodbridge is adamant that Bradstreet is “honoured, and esteemed where she lives, for her gracious demeanour, her eminent parts, her pious conversation; her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete managing of her family occasions,” and he assures the reader the time for poetry writing was not taken from her motherly duties but was “curtailed from her sleep” (p. 2). Like the mother she depicts in her elegy, Bradstreet is a pious Christian woman.

Her ability, then, to be both a poet and a woman worthy of existing in the Puritan model community was a careful balancing act, which was made possible in part by that force of a father who allowed and perhaps even encouraged her good education. Anne Bradstreet’s breadth of reading and knowledge was remarkable for her time. Bradstreet’s biographer Elizabeth Wade White argues that “among the few English women writers before her none displayed so encyclopaedic a mind” (p. 60). Bradstreet probably had at her disposal in her youth the library of the earl of Lincoln and certainly later her father’s extensive library. When Anne and Simon Bradstreet’s own house burned in 1666, they reportedly lost eight hundred books, showing that Bradstreet and her husband not only flourished in America but had invested in a large library of their own. What Bradstreet read is reflected in her poetry. Her elegies to Sir Philip Sidney and Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, a French poet
read widely in translation in seventeenth-century England, highlights their influence. Her work “The Four Monarchies” also shows the specific influence of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* (1614). And throughout all of her poems, she uses classical references that reflect her broad education.

Even with poetic influences and scholarly encouragement in her life, all indications are that Bradstreet wrote her poetry initially for herself and a small group of family and friends. It was common to circulate writing, such as letters and personal narratives, among intimates, but women did not usually publish their work for wider public consumption. The key event, then, in the literary biography of Anne Bradstreet and the reason centuries of readers have had access to her poetry was one out of her control and apparently even without her foreknowledge. Bradstreet had at some point prepared a collection of poems as a gift to her father with a dedicatory poem apologizing for their “ragged lines” and urging him to “Accept my best, my worst vouchsafe a grave” (p. 14). Bradstreet’s brother-in-law John Woodbridge took this manuscript with him to England and had it published in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America; or, Severall Poems, compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning, full of delight*. He claims in the preface that he is putting forth the poems without the author’s knowledge and “contrary to her expectation” in order to “pleasure those that earnestly desired the view of the whole” of her poetic works (p. 2). That Woodbridge was in collusion with others is evident in the prefatory poems written by Woodbridge, Nathaniel Ward (who had published *The Simple Cobbler of Agawam* in 1647), and several other friends. In his poem Woodbridge anticipates Bradstreet’s reaction: “If you shall think it will be to your shame / To be in print, then I must bear the blame” (p. 5). Here, however, Woodbridge is assuming Bradstreet’s female modesty. Bradstreet did indeed express embarrassment but not because of her gender. Her poem “The Author to Her Book” suggests that the book, as a child with “blemishes,” was not ready to be sent out into the world dressed in “homespun” (pp. 238, 239). How much of this demurral is candor and how much convention is anyone’s guess. Bradstreet, however, did then edit the poems and add others including “The Author to Her Book” in preparation for a second edition, which was published six years after her death. This work suggests that she did not mind so much the publication of her poetry, but simply wanted to put her best efforts forward.

*The Tenth Muse* was popular in its time, and later Cotton Mather would praise Bradstreet in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), a work detailing the religious history of New England, by putting her in the company of the mathematician and philosopher Hipatia of Alexandria, the Renaissance polymath Margherita Sarroccoli, the Byzantine empress Eudocia, and other learned women in history. Bradstreet died in 1672 at the age of sixty, certainly unaware of the poetic legacy she had left behind. Her legacy as a mother, though, was surely evident, as her eight children had more than fifty children of their own.

**THE TENTH MUSE: “FOUR TIMES FOUR”**

The contents of the original 1650 edition of *The Tenth Muse* consisted of Woodbridge’s preface, the poems by “friends” attesting to Bradstreet’s ability, and thirteen of Bradstreet’s poems. These include the dedication to her father; “The Prologue”; her “four times four” poems, which are four poems on the four elements, humors, ages of man, and seasons; a long historical poem titled “The Four Monarchies”; a poem on contemporary political troubles titled “A Dialogue Between Old England and New”; elegies to Sidney, Du Bartas, and Queen Elizabeth I; and two poems that speak to her Puritan background, “David’s Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan” and “Of the Vanity of All Worldly Creatures.” The poetry in this first edition is imitative and conventional, written almost entirely in heroic couplets. Most critics see these poems as ambitious but less appealing than Bradstreet’s later, personal poems. Since the 1980s, however, critics have mined the public poems to find evidence of Bradstreet’s feminism and the seeds of her particular interests, such as...
negotiating the balance between earthly concerns and faith. Though conventional, Bradstreet’s poetry in this volume clearly shows off her vast education. In addition to Raleigh and Du Bartas, Bradstreet notes the British physician Helkiah Crooke as a source for the descriptions of physiology in “The Four Humours.” Bradstreet’s classical allusions, which are far more frequent than her biblical ones, speak to her reading and background. When, for example, she wants to defend her ability to write poetry in “The Prologue,” she refers to the Greeks, who made their nine muses female. That her brother-in-law designated her, then, as the “tenth muse” situates the text within a particular context and audience: educated Englishmen. Even though Bradstreet probably did not imagine her poetry would end up being published and read by an English audience, the poems are nevertheless pitched for their current tastes and literary level.

“The Prologue,” the opening poem, performs the conventional function of an apology to the reader for any deficits in the work to follow, showing a stance of humility on the part of the author. Bradstreet, however, offers both the standard apology and a defense of a woman writing in a man’s genre. From the outset, then, she negotiates a very clever compromise between herself and her audience and begins by seemingly limiting her audience’s expectations:

To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings,
Of cities founded, commonwealths begun,
For my mean pen are too superior things....

(p. 15)

Ironically, she will later discuss these very things in her long poem on the four monarchies of the world. After stanzas claiming that she cannot write as well as Du Bartas, that her muse is “foolish, broken, blemished,” and that her “wounded brain admits no cure,” she then transitions to complain about the “carping tongues” who do not acknowledge that women can write poetry (pp. 15–16). Some critics see this fifth stanza as a shift in the poem from appeasing her audience to critiquing them, while others see her employing an ironic tone throughout. Jane Donahue Eberwein argues that we should read the poem as “an argument: an attempt to articulate and reconcile opposition by emphasizing discrepancies while hinting at unity” (p. 219). Bradstreet attempts this reconciliation with those “carping tongues” by appealing to classical authority: the Greeks and those nine female muses. But in case this authority does not suffice, she then seems to cede the argument in stanza 7:

Men have precedency and still excel,
It is but vain unjustly to wage war;
Men can do best, and women know it well.

(p. 17)

The subtle irony in the last word “well” here suggests how much the tongues have to “carp” to keep the superiority in place. Bradstreet ends with the unity that Eberwein describes, as she asks the “high flown quills that soar the skies” to “give thyme or parsley wreath” to her attempts. She is then able to appeal to their vanity in a turn of mock humility: “This mean and unrefined ore of mine / Will make your glist’ring gold but more to shine” (p. 17).

“The Prologue” is followed by Bradstreet’s poems on the four elements, humors, ages of man, and seasons. Although much of this poetry is simply reiterating the order of the world as seen by seventeenth-century society, Bradstreet chooses a dramatic approach for doing so, in writing the first two poems as dialogues between sisters who play the various parts, such as “Fire” and “Blood.” The different aspects in each examination thus are contrasted as each sister tries to outdo the others, either by boasting of her own importance or by criticizing the others. Bradstreet herself was the eldest of five sisters, so surely some of her own experience finds its way into the personifications. Although this dialogue form does not originate with Bradstreet, it is useful to her in these poems because it allows her to draw on the power of oratory as each sister takes the stage and presents her case to the reader, and it allows her to insert human reactions, such as humor or anger. She will return to the dialogue between sisters in later poetry as well, suggesting that the early poems that rely heavily on other sources prepared her for the later, more personal poems.
The opening poem is “The Four Elements,” which begins with the sisters arguing over who should speak first, an argument that is dramatized by their various aspects:

the quaking earth did groan, the sky looked black,
The fire, the forced air, in sunder crack;
The sea did threat the heavens, the heavens the earth,
All looked like a chaos or new birth....

(p. 18)

Fire wins the battle to begin as “the noblest and most active element” and puts forth answers to the question of her worth (p. 19). The wide-ranging discussion pulls from classical astrology, as the planets are judged to be in Fire’s purview, as well as from the Bible, as Sodom was consumed by fire. Earth answers with “I am th’ original of man and beast,” claiming not just the creation of life but the countries and cities that house that life (p. 23). Water is angry at Earth’s description, and the drama is heightened here, as Water directly answers that Earth should have praised her because Water is the “Cause of your fruitfulness” (p. 26). Air speaks last but is able to answer them all: “I am the breath of every living soul” (p. 30). She claims that she is superior to the other elements because “when I’m thoroughly rarified turn Fire: / So when I am condense, I turn to Water” (p. 31). While this is questionable science, the poem focuses on the interconnected nature of the elements and the order of the universe. “The Four Humours,” which appears as the next poem, is linked to the first in that each humor acknowledges an element as her mother, further portraying the unity of the universe. “The Four Humours,” which appears as the next poem, is linked to the first in that each humor acknowledges an element as her mother, further portraying the unity of the universe. Carrie Galloway Blackstock argues that while “Bradstreet’s fascination with the idea of wholeness” is evident in the structure of these poems, so too is her comment on gender (p. 223). In “The Four Humours,” Choler explains that she and her mother, Fire, were “both once masculines / the world doth know” but are playing females because of the necessity of being sisters with the other elements and humors. This causes Blackstock to posit a “deconstruction of gendered identity” in these early poems, when most critics focus on “The Prologue” or Bradstreet’s later personal poems to investigate concerns about gender (p. 226).

When Bradstreet turns to the poem “Of the Four Ages of Man,” however, the gender is shifted as each age is depicted as masculine, although still in familial terms: Childhood is the son of Phlegm and grandson of Water, Youth descends from Blood and Air, Manly comes from Fire and Choler, and Old Age is aligned with Earth and Melancholy. In this poem Bradstreet again plays up the dramatic angle by dressing each age in the appropriate costume. Childhood is “clothed in white and green to show / His spring was intermixed with some snow,” while Youth is in “gorgeous attire” with “his suit of crimson and his scarf of green” (pp. 54, 55). Manly appropriately wears a sword, while Old Age carries a cane. Bradstreet departs from her structure a bit in the section on Old Age, when the character begins rehearsing a history of everything he has seen, perhaps anticipating Bradstreet’s later poem detailing the history of the world. “The Four Seasons” returns to depicting female characters but continues the staging of the different personas. Many critics note that it is clear the landscapes Bradstreet is describing in the seasons are not American but conventional English pastoral settings. In the section on summer, for example, she describes the “frolic swains, the shepherd lads” going to “wash the thick clothed flocks with pipes full glad,” a description that owes more to Edmund Spenser than to New England (p. 72).

After the “four times four,” Bradstreet includes one more poem similarly structured, “The Four Monarchies.” This is her most ambitious poem in The Tenth Muse, running 3,572 lines and covering the Assyrian, Persian, Grecian, and Roman empires. Besides versifying Raleigh’s History of the World, Bradstreet also retains some of his portrayals of the disputes about how to present specific historical events. She uses asides, such as “(but that I doubt)” and “(as we are told)” to give her readers a sense of the tenuous nature of the history that has been passed down (p. 80). She seems especially keen to defend the Assyrian queen Semiramis (Sammu-ramat), suggesting that “some think” the Greeks
slandered “her name and fame / By their aspersions” when actually “Her wealth she showed in building Babylon / Admired of all, but equalized of none” (p. 81). This defense of a female leader will find an echo in the collection in Bradstreet’s elegy to Queen Elizabeth. The poem ends with an “apology” because it is, despite its length, unfinished.

Bradstreet addresses a more courageous public topic in choosing to write on the contemporary empire of Britain in the next poem, “A Dialogue Between Old England and New; Concerning Their Present Troubles, Anno 1642.” The events in this poem are current and the Puritan community directly implicated as the “New England” of the poem. She again uses the technique of personification in casting Old England as mother and New England as daughter. The poem is a conversation between the two on the mother’s troubles. Bradstreet’s lasting connection to her homeland is evident in her depiction of the daughter’s distress at the mother’s problems: “What means this wailing tone, this mournful guise? / Ah, tell thy daughter, she may sympathize” (p. 191). Written in 1642 when civil war had broken out in England, the poem also indicates the distance Bradstreet and perhaps her fellow colonists felt from the turmoil, when Old England answers, “Art ignorant indeed of these my woes? / Or must my forced tongue these griefs disclose?” (p. 191). Robert Boschman explains that the civil war not only made the colonists feel isolated, it made them question their very identity. With an exodus of Puritans back to England and the rise in Puritan power there, the colony in America seemed less crucial (p. 39). After a rehearsal of various historical possibilities for England’s problems, Old England admits that the root causes are “my sins, / the breach of sacred laws,” specifically religious persecution. Bradstreet’s Puritan sentiments about the danger of Catholicism are quite strong when New England urges her mother to “root out Popelings head, tail, branch, and rush” because “We hate Rome’s whore with all her trumpery” (p. 199). Although riskier than previous poems in its attention to current political concerns, Bradstreet affirms her community’s beliefs while picturing the relationship of the colony to England as that of a caring and dutiful daughter who will not only speak the truth to the mother but will pray for her redemption.

THE TENTH MUSE: ELEGIES

In addition to the “four times four” poems and Bradstreet’s exploration into politics and history, the original Tenth Muse also included elegies on Sir Philip Sidney, the French poet Du Bartas, and Queen Elizabeth. In the first two poems, about poets, Bradstreet continues the deprecating strain displayed in “The Prologue,” ever mindful that she is an unknown poet writing about well-known and beloved poets. These poems also continue the careful attention to gender from “The Prologue,” with Bradstreet often speaking in specifically feminine terms about her deficiencies in accurately lauding these male poets. In her elegy on Queen Elizabeth, though, Bradstreet does not hide her delight that such a powerful figure was female.

In “An Elegy upon That Honorable and Renowned Knight Sir Philip Sidney,” Bradstreet begins by giving Sidney the bay wreath she denied herself earlier: “When England did enjoy her halcyon days, / Her noble Sidney wore the crown of bays” (p. 201). She then imagines how his poetry interacts with the muses; instead of the muses inspiring him, his art affects them, as, for example, when “His rhetoric struck Polymnia dead” or when “More worth was his than Clio could set down” (p. 201). The title of Bradstreet’s collection, which was presumably given by her brother-in-law Woodbridge, nevertheless becomes quite interesting in that Bradstreet then becomes the tenth muse also affected by Sidney’s poetry and also attempting to sing his praises. After detailing in seventy lines Sidney’s importance as a British poet, Bradstreet’s muse runs out of steam; she writes, “How to persist my Muse is more in doubt” (p. 203). Although she asks the nine muses to come to her aid, “Sidney had exhausted all their store” (p. 203). The muses then take her pen, seemingly injured by her weak attempt to elegize Sidney, but then “Errata through their leave [throws] me my pen,” allow-
ing her to write two more lines. Alice Henton points out that “Errata” is a feminized version of “Erato,” the muse of lyric poetry, so Bradstreet plays with the gender in her bid to write a bit more, which ends up being six lines instead of the two she was allotted (p. 307). Much like “The Prologue” when Bradstreet asks for a “small acknowledgement,” she is here asking for a few lines next to Sidney’s brilliance.

Bradstreet also claims another connection with the great poet, one of nationality and perhaps even of blood. The poem’s third line extols Sidney as “an honour to our British land” and later as “the brave refiner of our British tongue” (pp. 201, 202). Coming right after “A Dialogue Between Old England and New,” this poem elides the differences and distance highlighted by the previous poem concerning the current civil war and instead portrays the common cultural heritage in Sidney’s poetry. The generational metaphor of the previous poem continues as well when Bradstreet announces, “Then let none disallow of these my strains / Whilst English blood yet runs within my veins,” suggesting a kinship by blood (p. 202). In the last ten years, scholars influenced by the surge in Atlantic studies have explored the focus on colonial versus national identity in Bradstreet’s poetry, which has contributed to the renewed attention to Bradstreet’s earlier nondomestic poetry such as the elegies.

In elegizing the French poet Du Bartas, Bradstreet is not claiming a national inheritance, but still perhaps an artistic one. Her language in this poem is almost fawning. Du Bartas is “matchless” and Bradstreet’s sight is “dazzled” (p. 205). She again uses the imagery of the muse to convey her deference to the superior ability of a well-known poet by imagining her muse as a mere child who can only sit and watch. The conception of her work as a child connects this poem to “The Author to Her Book,” in which she bemoans the fact that her work went into the world rather like a poorly dressed child. Bradstreet’s experience of mothering eight children surely figures into how she perceives her poetry. What she admires about Du Bartas becomes clear when Bradstreet details all of the different fields his poetry engages with, from natural philosophy to anatomy. Her admiration of his style is also clear: “Pardon if I adore, when I admire” (p. 207). Bradstreet may, however, again be requesting some “small acknowledgement” in this poem. Louisa Hall points out that at the beginning, Du Bartas is pictured as the powerful sun and Bradstreet as bringing only a daisy, a “homely flower,” to honor him because she is “barren,” but by the end of the poem Du Bartas is in his grave, only being “revived” through his fame, which perhaps her poem has helped (pp. 205, 208).

Queen Elizabeth’s fame does not need Anne Bradstreet’s assistance, but Bradstreet adds her praise in “In Honor of That High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory,” a laudatory title if there ever was one. That we hear more from Anne Bradstreet the Englishwoman than from Anne Bradstreet the Puritan is evident in the opening lines, when she claims that Elizabeth’s glory is so great “That men account it no impiety / To say thou wert a fleshly deity” (p. 209). While this may not be exactly blasphemous, it is strong language. Unlike Sidney and Du Bartas, whose praises can just be captured by Bradstreet’s elegies, Bradstreet claims that “No Phoenix pen, nor Spenser’s poetry” can capture “Eliza’s works[,] wars, praise” (p. 210). Elizabeth’s acceptance of the larger Protestant cause would have made her an acceptable model of praise for Puritans, but Bradstreet’s elegy focuses on gender: “She hath wiped off th’ aspersion of her sex, / That women wisdom lack to play the rex” (p. 210). Elizabeth even becomes here a “Phoenix,” the sun image used in other Bradstreet poems to refer to a powerful male figure, such as her husband, or to God. Bradstreet then rehearses Queen Elizabeth’s many successes, from conquering the Spanish Armada to defeating the “rude untamed Irish.” She compares Elizabeth to other powerful female figures in history, such as Semiramis, Dido, and Cleopatra, but finds that no one compares to the “Phoenix queen” (p. 212). After building up Elizabeth’s honors, Bradstreet then returns to the question of gender, directing challenging males: “Now say, have women worth? Or have they none?” (p. 212). In elegizing Elizabeth, Bradstreet not only
shows her continuing connection to her native land, referring to Elizabeth as “our Queen,” she also enlists the queen’s image and fame to suggest further that women do have worth and perhaps even the ability to write poetry.

“CONTEMPLATIONS”: EARTH AND HEAVEN

“Contemplations” is Bradstreet’s best work. In planning the second edition of her works, Bradstreet added this poem as well as five others. These poems show Bradstreet stretching beyond the earlier conventional forms, with the result that “Contemplations” is technically more sophisticated than the earlier published work. Instead of heroic couplets, the poem consists of seven-line stanzas, rhymed ababcc, with six lines of iambic pentameter, followed by the seventh in hexameter. The classical allusions that filled earlier poems are largely absent, as is the dramatic personification. In this poem, the poet speaks directly to the reader, sharing her thoughts as she goes for a walk in nature. The anxieties expressed in earlier poems about her ability to write well persist, but they are not tied to her gender because she is not comparing herself to famous and skilled male poets. The challenge presented to Bradstreet the poet in “Contemplations” is trying to write the glory of God with the problems of sin, mortality, and human frailty intervening. The difficulty is not that Anne Bradstreet herself as woman or novice is lacking skill but that humanity does not have the simple access to the creator that creatures in nature seem to have.

The poem’s focus is this relationship between creation and creator, or between earth and heaven, a theme that will carry into other poems, including “The Flesh and the Spirit” and “Upon the Burning of Our House.” Bradstreet was clearly interested in the tension between living a material earthly existence and trying to keep a faith focused on heavenly or spiritual matters. That earthly existence can take the form of the vanity of cherishing material belongings, as it does when her house burns down, or communion with nature, as it does in “Contemplations.” Nature in this poem is no longer described according to the pattern of the English pastoral with shepherds and sheep seen earlier in “The Four Seasons.” Here the natural world is more clearly a description of Bradstreet’s own environs in New England. Her musings on the pleasures and pitfalls of the material world, then, are prompted not by an attempt to work in a literary genre through its accepted tropes but by her own experience in her immediate surroundings.

Those surroundings are rendered in beautiful detail, one of the principal reasons readers have been drawn to this particular poem. She clearly delights in the natural world around her, which makes this poem a kind of turning point in the relationship of the Puritans to the natural world. The earlier Puritan community saw the natural world around them as something they needed to civilize and tame. William Bradford, for example, in writing about the New World during the first half of the seventeenth century, in Of Plymouth Plantation, famously comments that all the pilgrims could see was a “hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men” (p. 116). The famed Puritan preacher of the eighteenth century Jonathan Edwards, however, describes in his “Personal Narrative” (1740) his “very secret and retired place” in the woods he used “for a place of prayer” (p. 356). Bradstreet’s wandering through the woods to contemplate her relationship to God reveals a shift in Puritan thinking from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century about the use of the natural world. Critics disagree about whether Bradstreet’s stance toward nature in the poem puts her squarely within the Puritan theology of her day or whether it makes her a rebel. Some critics have connected her relationship to nature in this poem to that of the later Romantics. Josephine Piercy even wonders if Romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or William Wordsworth read Bradstreet’s poetry (p. 101). Ann Stanford argues, however, that Bradstreet differs from the later Romantics because nature is not the end in itself but the means to understanding God (Stanford 1974, p. 103). Despite disagreement about the implications of her portrayal of nature, critics all agree that Bradstreet is successful in writing a meditative poem set not just in the natural world but also clearly in the New World.
“Contemplations” opens with an autumn setting. That we are in a real setting and not a theater set piece is indicated early when Bradstreet comments that the trees’ “leaves and fruits seemed painted, but was true,” and so, “Rapt were my senses at this delectable view” (p. 220). This is not the formal presentation of the persona of Autumn in “The Four Seasons,” but a personal experience and intimate reaction to nature; “delectable” suggests that the poet finds the view worthy of consumption. We are only in the second stanza when the poet begins to connect the natural world to a contemplation on God: “If so much excellence abide below, / How excellent is He that dwells on high” (p. 220). An oak tree that seems to have existed for a hundred years or perhaps a thousand causes Bradstreet to muse on eternity. Her vision then scans from the trees up to the sky, and she writes the next four stanzas on the sun. This is one of the places discussed by critics who argue she is rebelling against Puritan doctrine, as she writes, “Soul of this world, this universe’s eye, / No wonder some made thee a deity” (p. 221). Her interest in nature borders on worship here, although in the next line she explains that she knows better. She then romanticizes the sun, picturing it as a “bridegroom” greeting the morning with “smiles and blushes” (p. 221). At the end of the fourth stanza she again connects nature to the creator, pondering that if the sun is so glorious, “How full of glory then must thy Creator be” (p. 222).

The poet continues her walk and her musings as she comes to a river. Throughout the poem she depicts herself as alone. Here the river is a “lonely place” while earlier she was “silent alone”: “In pathless paths I lead my wand’ring feet” (p. 222). The play on feet shows the connections of the journey into nature and the composition of the poem. The portrayal of a writer gaining insight while alone in nature foreshadows later American writers, such as Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and even Emily Dickinson when she “started early” and “took my dog.” This is perhaps another reason why this poem resonates with critics, who are familiar with the theme in subsequent American literature. If Bradstreet becomes “American” by describing a New England setting of autumn trees, dense woods, and the river heading to the ocean, she perhaps becomes more American in retrospect as later writers also combine sojourns in nature with meditations on larger ideas. At the river, Bradstreet expresses a kind of jealousy for the smooth trip the water makes to the ocean, as she imagines her own journey to heaven and expresses envy of the fish who follow instinct without having to know why.

Bradstreet is then again confronted with another creature who can sing, when a “sweet-tongued Philomel” lands nearby (p. 228). This is one of the poem’s few classical references. Not only are nightingales not native to North America, Bradstreet references the mythic Philomela, whose tongue was cut out because she dared to expose her rapist and was eventually turned into a bird. In Bradstreet’s poem, the one who could not speak then begins to sing “forth a most melodious train,” causing Bradstreet, who has lamented her own inability to speak adequately, to wish for “wings with her a while to take my flight” (p. 228). In ruminating on the difference...
between the “merry Bird” who does not worry about the past or the future and “Man at the best a creature frail and vain,” Bradstreet finds that only humans have the possibility of immortality. Although people are like the mariner who “sings merrily” and thinks himself “Master of the seas” until a sudden storm makes him “long for a more quiet port,” she finds hope in an image of redemption in the ending couplet: “But he whose name is graved in the white stone / Shall last and shine when all of these are gone” (p. 230). Despite her misgivings about her ability to put her musings into verse and to articulate her praise for her creator, she, like the Philomel, finds a way to sing.

The theme of the materiality of earthly things versus the immortality of heaven is continued in three of Bradstreet’s other poems: “The Flesh and the Spirit,” “The Vanity of All Worldly Things,” and “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666.” It is clear from the outset that in a battle between flesh/earth/material and spirit/heaven/faith, the Puritan Bradstreet will show the latter of these as the victors. In these poems, however, the earthly side of the struggle is shown sympathetically, and heaven is depicted in a way to appease the desire for material possessions. Bradstreet returns to personification in “The Flesh and the Spirit” by depicting an exchange between sisters. The familial paradigm makes the conversation competitive. Flesh begins by baiting her sister: “Dost contemplation feed thee so / Regardlessly to let earth go?,” words that point the reader back to Bradstreet’s desire in “Contemplations” to consume the “delectable” nature around her. Flesh argues her point by making her sister Spirit sound inconsequential and flighty: “Dost dream of things beyond the moon / And dost thou hope to dwell there soon?” (p. 231). In contrast to the ethereal, Flesh can offer the pleasures of the earth including pearls and gold. Spirit then answers by claiming that she is thinking of heavenly rewards, but her tone is haughty. She wants to be “victor” over her sister because of her “ambition” (p. 233). Spirit claims not to be tempted by the “trash which earth does hold,” although her subsequent description of heaven is full of the same earthly goods that she rejects, as she imagines walls of “jasper stone,” “gates of pearl,” and streets of “transparent gold” (p. 234).

The other two poems on earth and heaven follow a similar pattern. “The Vanity of All Worldly Things” clearly depicts the folly of depending on earthly treasure: “He heaps up riches, and he heaps up sorrow” (p. 235). Even the wisest of men is tempted by vanity, but the alternative path to seek treasure in heaven is offered in the appealing terms of earthly treasure as the “pearl of price, this tree of life, this spring” (p. 237). Both this poem and “The Flesh and the Spirit” speak to the larger philosophical tension between earthly existence and faith, and even “Contemplations,” which takes a more personal point of view, treats the subject as a kind of theological struggle. When Bradstreet’s house burned down and she lost her earthly possessions, however, the struggle became immediate and real. As in “Contemplations,” the poet speaks to the reader and leads us through her thought process. When the house burns, she first cries to God for strength and then has the appropriate response: “I blest His name that gave and took” (p. 318). If the poem ended here, we would have the correct view of worldly goods, but by extending the poem and showing us her subsequent reactions, Bradstreet gives her reader a glimpse into the process of her faith. She admits that after the fire she missed her “pleasant things” and mourned that her house would no longer be there to host a “pleasant tale” or a “bridegroom’s voice” (p. 319). After these admissions, she chides herself for her dependence on earthly things. She appeases herself with the knowledge that she has treasure in heaven, but she pictures that heaven as a better house than the one she lost: “Thou hast an house on high erect, / Framed by that mighty Architect, / With glory richly furnished” (p. 319). Thus in all of the poems where Bradstreet contemplates the competing pulls of this world and the next, she gives the reader a dialogue. Heaven always wins, but earth in its beautiful autumn dress or its warm house gives her a way to imagine that heaven.
None of Anne Bradstreet’s personal poems written about her family members or herself were published in the first edition of her poetry. Only in the third edition published in 1678, which was probably assembled by Bradstreet’s nephew-in-law, do the poems about herself and her family become public (Hensley, p. xxix). These poems, however, next to “Contemplations,” are what critics have valued most (until the recent interest by several critics in the earlier work). That critics value what was not even published in Bradstreet’s lifetime could show that the purpose of Bradstreet’s poetry and the taste of her seventeenth-century audience was simply different from modern preferences for looser forms and more self-revelatory poems. For Adrienne Rich, these are the poems “which rescue Anne Bradstreet from the Women’s Archives and place her conclusively in literature” (p. xvii). These are also the poems that provide insight into the daily life triumphs and struggles of a Puritan woman in seventeenth-century New England. Rich comments that Bradstreet’s voice in these works is “direct and touching” (p. xix). Abram Van Engen argues that the domestic focus in Bradstreet’s later verse even anticipates the sentimental literature popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bradstreet certainly talks about love, loss, marriage, and death in ways that focus attention on the value on the domestic realm.

As a daughter, a wife, and the mother of eight children, Bradstreet’s numerous poems on her family reflect the time and care she devoted to her familial role. She gives every indication that she delighted in this role. Her poem about her mother, “An Epitaph on My Dear and Ever-Honoured Mother Mrs. Dorothy Dudley,” is a brief but positive depiction of a “loving,” “friendly,” and “religious” woman who left “a blessed memory” (p. 219). Her poems about her father are more complex but appreciative nonetheless. In “To the Memory of My Dear and Ever Honoured Father Thomas Dudley,” Bradstreet presents Dudley as her “father, guide, instructor too” (p. 216). She emphasizes his devotion to the community as a founder of New England and a “true patriot” to the colony (p. 217). In “To Her Father with Some Verses,” Bradstreet’s relationship to Dudley is depicted through the conceit of a debt she owes. She explains that any worth in her is due to his principal, a debt she will not be able to discharge but will pay until she dies. The positive influence of both of her parents is clear in the homage she pays them.

Bradstreet’s poems about her husband likewise paint a picture of a happy relationship. She focuses on the unity in her marriage; in “To My Dear and Loving Husband” she begins, “If ever two were one, then surely we” (p. 245). She borrows the language from earlier poems expressing the richness of earth to emphasize the depth of her love, such as when she writes, “I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold” (p. 245). What makes this love poem interesting in terms of Bradstreet’s specific experience is the way she combines the earthly attachment she has to her husband to her religious beliefs. Since she cannot repay him for his love, much as she cannot repay her father, she hopes that “the heavens reward thee” (p. 245). She then connects their persistence in maintaining their marriage to their spiritual lives: “Then while we live, in love let’s so persevere / That when we live no more, we may live ever” (p. 245). Bradstreet continues to play with ideas of earth and heaven in “A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment,” one of several poems written about her anxiety when he is gone from home. This poem echoes the natural imagery from the earlier poems “The Four Seasons” and “Contemplations” to describe their relationship. Here she is Earth, who is in mourning because “My Sun is gone” (p. 246). She extends this metaphor to portray her limbs as “chilled” without the heat of the sun, although she ends with another picture of unity: “I here, thou there, yet both but one” (p. 247). In the subsequent poem titled “Another,” the sun again makes an appearance but here as “Phoebus,” who is summoned as a messenger to “Commend me to the man more loved than life, / Show him the sorrows of his widowed wife” (p. 248). In a third poem also titled “Another,” as if Bradstreet’s sorrow at her husband’s absence cannot be contained
in just one poem, she writes that without him she leads “a joyless life” and emphasizes again the unity: “Let’s still remain but one, till death divide” (p. 251). All together the poems to her husband are passionate; she does not seem to be speaking from the duty of a prescribed role but from her love for her husband and her distress at his absence.

Bradstreet’s children are the subject of “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June 1659.” She uses the metaphor of eight birds hatching in her nest as the basis of the poem. Each bird learns to fly and to sing. The image of the singing Philomela in “Contemplations” connects singing to both writing poetry and praising the creator. In this poem, singing is expressing joy. After detailing the life, direction, and mating of each of the eight birds, Bradstreet claims she will not “lament” in old age but will “sing” (p. 255). She only hopes that her children remember she loved them, echoing the feeling she expresses in her earlier poem about her mother.

The remainder of Bradstreet’s personal poems center around two subjects: her multiple bouts of illness and her grief at the death of family members. The focus throughout her poetry on an earthly existence with a heavenly faith continues in these poems as she faces hardships, but while her poems on the deaths of grandchildren show that sometimes her loss was indeed inconsolable, she is able to negotiate this tension in dealing with her illnesses. In a letter written “To My Dear Children,” which Bradstreet intended them to read after she died, she explains that throughout her life she would occasionally “sit loose from” God, but that “by one affliction or other [God] hath made me look home,” and that this “correction” most often took the form of “sickness, weakness, pains” (p. 264). This belief in sickness as divine intervention affects her portrayal of illness in her poetry. Illness was part of the difficulty of earthly existence that led the sufferer to keep focusing on heaven. In her “Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno 1632” she muses on mortality and the passage of time:

O bubble blast, how long can’t last?
that always art a breaking,
No sooner blown, but dead and gone,
ev’n as a word that’s speaking.

The poem’s tone changes, however, when Bradstreet references her salvation: “The race is run, the field is won, / the victory’s mine I see” (p. 241). Her poem “Upon Some Distemper of Body” follows the same trajectory but this time by using the metaphor of a ship tossed at sea, probably drawn from Bradstreet’s experience of the transatlantic voyage. She is “tossing” and “drenched with tears” until the one “who sendeth help” becomes her “anchor” (p. 242).

The hopeful tone ending these poems is likewise attempted in the poems about the deaths of three grandchildren, but whether she actually achieves peace or is being ironic is debated by critics. In any case these poems honestly and bluntly express Bradstreet’s grief at their deaths and her struggle with God’s hand in their early demise. In her poem “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet” she relies on the natural imagery that has helped her contemplate before. The child is a “fair flower that for a space was lent” (p. 257). As in her poem about her house burning, Bradstreet is mourning but chiding herself for her grief, asking, “why should I once bewail thy fate” when the girl is “settled in an everlasting state,” but just as in the earlier poem, Bradstreet continues to process her grief (p. 257). In the second stanza she admits that it is natural for things to die, although fruit falls when it is ripe, whereas the flower of her granddaughter is more like a plant “new set” (p. 257). She can only point to God as the cause, because God guides both “nature and fate” (p. 257). When her second granddaughter, Anne, died, Bradstreet again turned to natural imagery to process the loss. The girl is a “withering flower” that was simply “lent” for a season (p. 258). Bradstreet attempts the turn toward faith in this poem by imagining she will eventually join the child in heaven. The third poem, on the death of a grandson, suggests the most difficulty for Bradstreet in reconciling her grief. He is the third flower gone. In this poem Bradstreet expresses faith, but perhaps only because she is supposed to: “Let’s say He’s merciful as well as just” (p.
259. It is unclear whether she is assured by this statement of faith and aware that “He will return and make up all our losses” or whether she says this in the ironic voice critics have found in other poems. What is clear is that when faced with loss, Bradstreet turned to poetry to process her pain and to contemplate her faith. She even crafts a kind of epitaph for herself in her poem “As Weary Pilgrim,” written three years before her death. Here she is the “pilgrim” who has lived on earth but now is a “clay house mold’ring away” (p. 322). That she is suffering physically is quite clear when she writes, “Oh, how I long to be at rest” where there will be “no fainting fits” and no “grinding pains” (p. 322). She ends by beckoning: “Lord make me ready for that day, / Then come, dear Bridegroom, come away” (p. 322).

CONCLUSION: LEGACY

When we consider the remarkable breadth of Anne Bradstreet’s subject matter and her honest portrayal of faith and doubt in the context of her life as Puritan pilgrim in colonial New England, we can only conclude that Bradstreet was a remarkable woman living in interesting times. The Irish poet Eavan Boland comments, “Anne Bradstreet is that rare thing: a poet who is inseparable from history. The proportions are not usually so equal and compelling. She can be located in the same way as a place name on a map, and we can judge the distance more accurately because of that” (p. 180). That place and history was harsh, as Adrienne Rich put it, with “confines as severe as any American poet has confronted” (p. xx). But given Bradstreet’s portrayal of her many illnesses as interventions by God to shift her attention back to heavenly things, in addition to her tendency to write during these times of stress to process her doubts and her faith, it is possible that the hardships were not hurdles for the poetry but were the reason for the poetry. Her writing connects her to her English roots in the middle of a colonial wilderness and it displays her education as she versifies her readings, but it also allows her a place to gain understanding of the hardships of her life and even the history of her particularly interesting place on the map.

Whatever the impetus for the poetry, what she wrote endures for readers and for other poets. John Berryman’s 1953 poem “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet” imagines her rebelling and submitting to her culture and her female role. Though controversial on a purely factual basis and because of Berryman’s appropriation of Bradstreet’s voice, the poem nonetheless shows the power of Bradstreet’s seventeenth-century poetry for a modern audience. Part of that power derives from Bradstreet’s different roles; as Boland remarks, “It is Anne Bradstreet’s unique achievement that she could burrow into the cracks, discover the air of history, and find a breathing space to be Puritan, poet, and woman” (p. 185). Questions of who Bradstreet is—Puritan, rebel, worldly, feminist—remain part of the intrigue of her poetry, but one identity is clear: America’s first poet.

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