Anne Bradstreet

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[(essay date 1994) In the following essay, Eberwein examines Bradstreet's shifting but enduring critical appeal, arguing that her intelligence and maternal voice have maintained her literary importance more than her status as the first published American poet.]

Historically, metaphorically, and even biologically mother of American poetry, Anne Bradstreet lived at a time that precluded any sort of literary "career"; yet she used her pen as an instrument of suprisingly durable power.¹ This English gentlewoman on the Massachusetts frontier turned to poetry for intellectual discipline, as an opportunity to engage in witty exchanges within a supportive community, and as a means of spiritual expression. What might have remained a private avocation became a public event with the 1650 London printing of The Tenth Muse, which established Bradstreet's dual reputation for her time as both godly housewife and "synopsis of arts."² At the end of the century, Cotton Mather acclaimed her poems as affording "a grateful Entertainment unto the Ingenious, and a Monument for her Memory beyond the Stateliest Marbles" (233).

Yet the Magnalia, from which I draw this accolade, provides biographies only of ministers and magistrates—all men. So Anne Bradstreet enters that history only indirectly through connections with two governors Mather admired, her father, Thomas Dudley, and her husband, Simon Bradstreet, and through one he despised, her half-brother Joseph Dudley. If the design of his narrative forced Mather to subordinate his tribute to the poet within portraits of these male relatives, the chronicler showed sound judgment in honoring her father through this accomplished daughter, New England's answer to the learned women of European tradition. Dudley provided Anne Bradstreet with education as well as inspiration. Ardent reformed Protestants, he and his wife, Dorothy York, introduced their son and four daughters to the Bible in early childhood. When Anne, second child and eldest girl, was about seven, Dudley moved his family from his native Northampton to Lincolnshire, where he became steward to the Earl of Lincoln. Anne grew up in the Earl's household—studying with the nobleman's daughters and enjoying access to an impressive library that she obviously used well. By the time she married her father's assistant in 1628, she had acquired an impressive grounding in history, literature, and religion. She had also survived smallpox and made considerable progress in her Christian pilgrimage, which she later recorded in a manuscript addressed to her children.

Dudley's decision to join the 1630 Puritan exodus to Massachusetts Bay influenced the young Bradstreets to embark also with John Winthrop's expedition. Anne made the harrowing Atlantic passage aboard the flagship Arbella (named for her good friend, the Earl's daughter, who perished with her husband shortly after the landing at Salem). The Dudleys and Bradstreets survived, however, and established their first new-world homes in Charlestown before moving to Newton (now Cambridge) in 1631 and Agawam (Ipswich) in 1635. There Bradstreet, relieved of infertility problems that beset the early years of her otherwise happy marriage, devoted herself to care for her four sons and four daughters (those "eight birds hatched in one nest" that inspired the modern stained-glass portrait of this distinguished parishioner in St. Botolph's Church, Lincolnshire); she often maintained the household independently while her husband traveled on colonial affairs. Even in this outpost she benefited from a lively intellectual community and from her father's ample library, readily available to her until the Bradstreets moved to Andover around 1645 while her father and his second family returned to Boston. She also benefited from Dudley's example: the governor found time to write poems in the midst of his turbulent political career, including a manuscript (now lost) describing the four parts of the world. His daughter responded with her own quaternions, four verse essays each representing four elements, humors, seasons, or stages of life (with Old Age honorably represented as Thomas Dudley himself), and she dedicated the ambitious pieces to her father.

Poems written at Ipswich circulated in manuscript among family members and their circle before John Woodbridge, Bradstreet's admiring brother-in-law, carried a grouping to London in 1647 and arranged for their publication (along with commendatory verses from friends on both sides of the Atlantic) as The Tenth Muse Lately sprung up in America. OR Several Poems, compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning, full of delight. These were impersonal poems and highly intellectual. A derivative verse chronicle of Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman monarchies took up half the book, with the quaternions accorded similar prominence. Other poems included elegies on Sir Philip Sidney, Queen Elizabeth, and the French Protestant poet Guillaume Du Bartas, whose manner she emulated in these versified displays of erudition, along with biblical paraphrases and poems commenting on the troubled politico-religious climate in her homeland either directly in "A Dialogue between Old England and New" or indirectly in "David's Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan." In light of work featured in this volume, the irony of Bradstreet's "Prologue" rings clearly when she declares "To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings, / Of cities founded, commonwealths begun, / For my mean pen are too superior things" (The Works of Anne Bradstreet 15). That, of course, is precisely what she meant to do, despite "each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits" and despite her own humility when comparing her efforts with those of poetic masters.
As the first book of original poetry by an English-American of either gender, The Tenth Muse attracted attention by virtue of its new-world female authorship. Woodbridge's prefatory epistle responds to the assumed question "whether it be a woman's work" with assurance that "it is the work of a woman, 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 more than so, these poems are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments" (Works 3). Obviously, they were also fruits of intensive reading, rhetorical shrewdness, and political savvy. Despite her objective manner of presentation, the poet insinuated her views on the controversies erupting in the English Civil War. She also asserted womanly self-assurance by characterizing the debating elements and humors as fractious sisters, personifying the two Englands as mother and daughter, and hailimg the late queen who "wiped off th' aspersion of her sex, / That women wisdom lack to play the rex" (Works 196). Seven years after its publication, a London book-seller still listed The Tenth Muse among "the most Vendible Books in England" (William London, quoted by White 271-72).

If this publication amazed its early readers, it apparently surprised its author also, somewhat to her dismay. "The Author to Her Book" addressed it as an unknempt ninth child, "Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" (Works 221). Rather than withdrawing from literature, however, Bradstreet responded to editorial errors by revising printed poems and attempting unsuccessfully to complete her abortive "Roman Monarchy," the manuscript of which finally succumbed to the fire that burned her Andover house. A posthumously printed volume, Several Poems (1678) presented amended versions of earlier poems, some modified to avoid offending the Cromwell government. The second book also featured a wealth of additional poems, some of them probably written before The Tenth Muse but omitted from that collection because of their personal nature and others written in Andover until her death in 1672. Particularly appealing are those poems offering insight into family life--warm, witty love poems to Simon Bradstreet, reflections on child-birth and mothering, elegies for her parents, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. It is here that readers experience Anne Bradstreet's emotional resilience that complements the intellectual energy shown in The Tenth Muse.

Powers of heart, mind, and will united in "Contemplations," generally regarded as Bradstreet's greatest poem. Forsaking her earlier couplets for a complex stanza composed of six iambic pentameter lines linked by rhyme to a concluding alexandrine, the poet meditated on contrasts that engaged her imagination: contrasts between nature's seeming perfection and man's frailty, between people of biblical times and the present, between mortality and eternity. Why could not man, "a creature frail and vain, / In knowledge ignorant, in strength but weak," join the grasshopper and nightingale instinctively singing God's praise (Works 212)? Why must he stray from the path of salvation while tiny fishes swam straight toward their goal? Did nature's sublime order invite her worship as well as her awe? Bradstreet responded eagerly here to nature's beauty, especially in her address to the sun as "Soul of this world, this universe's eye" (205), but she concluded with hope that eternal life would compensate for limitations below, that God's grace would bless the elect "whose name is graved in the white stone" with gifts transcending all this world's glory (214).

Neither book came out under Bradstreet's supervision, so questions remain as to which text more accurately reflects her wishes. Twentieth-century scholarly editors disagree, with Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Allan P. Robb choosing to reprint The Tenth Muse text that, despite frequent editorial blunders, may represent her original intentions. Jeannine Hensley, however, follows Several Poems to avail herself of Bradstreet's corrections even though an editor (probably John Rogers) may have interpolated his own revisions. Less reliable is the 1758 version of Several Poems, though its appearance demonstrates ongoing interest in her work.

A major source of new insight came with John Harvard Ellis's 1867 edition of The Works of Anne Bradstreet, in Prose and Verse. Although his introduction highlighted Dudley genealogical data of the sort that fascinated nineteenth-century antiquarians, Ellis introduced the Andover Manuscript, a collection of writings left by Bradstreet to her son Simon. For the first time, readers had access to her spiritual autobiography addressed "To My Dear Children" along with verse prayers and meditations inspired by recurring struggles with sickness and grief--all placed in a Christian context as sources of spiritual guidance."I have not been refined in the furnace of affliction as some have been," she observed with respect to a period of weakness and fasting, "but have rather been preserved with sugar than brine, yet will He preserve me to His heavenly kingdom" (Works 257). The manuscript includes prayers for her husband and children in their times of crisis as well as "Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House" and her final poem, "As Weary Pilgrim." "Meditations Divine and Moral" distilled everyday reflections into aphoristic prose.

It was this Bradstreet prose that Moses Coit Tyler singled out as "likely to be more attractive to the altered tastes of our time, than her poems can be," given that those poems betrayed the baroque infection he detested. While expressing sympathy for the cultural sacrifices entailed in her frontier life and acknowledging Bradstreet's rank as "the first professional poet of New England," Tyler lamented that "she was a pupil of the fantastic school of English poetry--the poetry of the later euhuists; the special note of which is the worship of the quaint, the strained, the disproportionate, the grotesque, and the total sacrifice of the beautiful on the altar of the ingenuous" (Cowell 31, 29, 32). John Greenleaf Whittier portrayed Anne Bradstreet as a sympathetic, though minor, character in his fictional Leaves from Margaret Smith's Journal, but she drew much less attention from romantic writers than that other Puritan Anne, Mistress Hutchinson.

This century's readers, critics, and anthologists make up for that neglect. Conrad Aiken revived Bradstreet's reputation by placing a group of her poems, without commentary, on the opening pages of American Poetry, 1671-1928. Subsequently,
studies of Puritan intellectualism joined with feminist scholarship to focus attention on Bradstreet's writing as a means of appreciating early American female experience. As Rosamond Rosenmeier recognizes in *Ann Bradstreet Revisited*, each generation constructs its own portrait of this woman. What readers since John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* tend to emphasize is the poet's presumed internal conflicts. No longer satisfied by John Woodbridge's assurances of her comfortable positioning within the gentry of Massachusetts Bay, today's readers wonder what Bradstreet meant in confessing her disappointment with New England, where she found "a new world and new manners, at which [her] heart rose" and why she "submitted" to what she took to be God's will by joining the Boston church (*Works* 241). Was it frontier rudeness against which this aristocratically educated lady rebelled? Was it the deprivation to which ambitions of the powerful men in her family subjected her? Did she resent restrictions placed by church and civic authorities on women who spoke out—women like Anne Hutchinson or Bradstreet's sister Sarah Keayne, whose public preaching led to ignominy? Was Anne Bradstreet what Ann Stanford dubbed her, "the worldly Puritan," because her attachments to this world's blessings matched her hope for everlasting rewards? (If so, where in that phrase do we place the emphasis, given that all Puritans strove to be "worldly" in contrast to monastic ascetics whom Protestant reformers denounced?)

One reason Bradstreet stimulates such questions is that hers was a profoundly dialectical imagination. Her writing, at its best, developed through processes of explicit or hidden argumentation. Only in the most arid stretches of "The Four Monarchies" did she settle for straightforward exposition, and even then she occasionally interrupted the flat progression of her gory narrative to quarrel with her sources or editorialize on some historic issue. The quaternions, whose subject matter could easily have prompted the dry, encyclopedic rehearsal of facts she found in Du Bartas, gained verve from the poet's choice of the debate format, especially when she personified the otherwise abstract speakers of "The Four Elements" and "The Four Humours" as feisty women. Bradstreet's famous "Prologue" (whether originally intended for *The Tenth Muse* or, as seems more likely, only for "The Four Monarchies") makes even cleverer use of rhetorical skill as the poet wittily undermines whatever charges envious neighbors might raise against her poetic aspirations. Debate lends somewhat different dramatic tension to "A Dialogue between Old England and New," and it may have been Solomon's wrestling with competing values in "Ecclesiastes" that motivated Bradstreet's paraphrase in "The Vanity of All Worldly Things." *Several Poems* added a related quarrel between "The Flesh and the Spirit." Although she moved beyond explicit debate both in personal poems and in her prose, Bradstreet maintained a habit of arguing graciously with her husband, children, friendly readers, and even herself—always confident that tensions would resolve, as they did in the quaternions, into unity.

When the same dialectical impulse shows up in Anne Bradstreet's religious writings, it prompts speculation about spiritual tension. Did she write, as Ann Stanford and Wendy Martin believe, in subtle defiance of a patriarchal Calvinist system, or was Puritanism itself the source of her art, as Robert Daly contends? Feminist critics uphold one side of this dialectic; scholars grounded in Puritan studies generally support the other. Synthesizing their positions results in the kind of unity Bradstreet worked toward in her more intellectual writings. Hers was a religious community that prodded its members to confront their doubts; so Bradstreet's spiritual autobiography, probably written to help her adult children through this often frightening process, offers revealing perspective on tensions she both acknowledged and surmounted. Was this daughter of an arch-Puritan who fulminated against toleration secretly sympathetic to Hutchinson's Antinomian rebellion, to Quakers, even—as one sentence of "To My Dear Children" suggests—to the "Popish" religion (*Works* 244)? It appears that she weighed claims for religious positions at odds with her own, but there is nothing Puritans would have found unorthodox in Bradstreet's writing. Her statements about her pilgrimage toward God provided a moving record of life experiences accepted as tests, corrections, and blessings. They reflect a scripture-centered, prayerful habit of mind that betrays no forced obedience to church authority. When Bradstreet acknowledges internal conflicts, her writings resemble conversion narratives of Massachusetts contemporaries and diaries of their clerical leaders. Nothing could be more characteristic of "the New England Way" than intensive self-searching among those who, like Bradstreet, still trusted that Christ's election numbered everlasting rewards? (If so, where in that phrase do we place the emphasis, given that all Puritans strove to be "worldly" in contrast to monastic ascetics whom Protestant reformers denounced?)

What keeps Bradstreet's poetry alive, of course, is not its author's service as an historical exemplar but rather her lively wit, driving intelligence, and maternal warmth. Although probably not a direct influence on later poets other than Berryman, she has been identified as a precursor of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and Adrienne Rich. In Bradstreet, readers encounter a stalwart, clear-headed, kindly woman to whom many respond as a sister (if sometimes a contentious one) and in whose poems they inscribe their own self-portraits. The Anne Bradstreet of current college anthologies bears little resemblance to the anonymous author of *The Tenth Muse*. Yet John Norton, a Puritan minister, responded to *Several Poems* by punning on the "Broad-street" of her capacious intellect (White 365-66), and subsequent readers move wherever they feel most comfortable along that quaint but comfortable avenue—still making use of what she left "in love" as evidence of this "living mother's mind" (*Works* 240).

**Notes**

1. Among poets genealogically identified as Anne Bradstreet's descendants are the Channings, Richard Henry Dana, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. Those who have been linked to her by aesthetic or spiritual kinship comprise a more extensive list. See Wendy Martin's *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* for perspective on one tradition. Elizabeth Wade White adds Elinor Wylie and Marianne Moore to the list of poets "who,
because of their essential intellectuality and philosophical integrity, might be considered as spiritual descendants of Anne Bradstreet" (379).

2. John Woodbridge's "Epistle to the Reader" and the many commendatory verses prefaced to The Tenth Muse established the poet's image at the time of publication. The quoted phrase comes from C.B.'s "Upon the Author" (Works 8). This is the edition I use in documenting Bradstreet passages within this essay.

Works Cited


Selected Bibliography

Archives

Harvard University's Houghton Library currently houses the original "Andover Manuscript," which still is owned by the Stevens Memorial Library in North Andover, Massachusetts.

Selected Primary Works

The Tenth Muse Lately sprung Up in America. OR Severall Poems, compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning, full of delight. London, 1650.

Several Poems Compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning, full of Delight. Boston, 1678.


Selected Secondary Works


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