Bradstreet, Anne (c. 1612–1672)

If ever two were one, then surely we. / If ever man were loved by wife, then thee; / If ever wife was happy in a man, / Compare with me ye women if you can.

‘To My Dear and Loving Husband’

Interest in Anne Bradstreet (1612/13–1672) has traditionally focused upon her status as a woman writer and early American Puritan poet, yet her literary legacy extends beyond both these categories. Her major poetry publications were The tenth muse (1650) and the posthumous Several poems (1678), but she also wrote in prose, leaving a collection of further writings known as the Andover manuscripts (‘Andover MSS’, Stevens Memorial Library, North Andover, Massachusetts; now deposited in the Houghton Library, Harvard University). As well as additional poems, these writings include aphorisms for her son, prose meditations on her daily and spiritual life, and an autobiographical legacy in epistolary form to her children. Interest in Bradstreet stretches across several discursive terrains, including her contributions to early modern English political thought and early American philosophy; her views on ecology, natural science, transatlantic travel and expansion, and education; and her discourses on suffering, mourning, and survival. Her writings are deeply influenced by her Calvinist providentialism and the intellectual outlook and literary expression of a transatlantic Puritan culture. In turn, Bradstreet’s influence upon modern feminist literary criticism and upon the discourses of English and American Puritanism is well established. Her Prologue to The tenth muse is well known and self-effacing, yet her apology for her poems on the grounds of modest skill and gender are at odds with the outspoken and agile defence of the woman's right to write in the poem’s fifth verse:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A Poets pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on Female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'l say it's stoln, or else it was by chance.

Anne Bradstreet (née Dudley) was born in 1612/13, probably in Northampton, the second of five children to Thomas Dudley (1576–1653) and his first wife, Dorothy Yorke (1581/82–1643). According to the New England Puritan minister Cotton Mather, her father was of great ‘Natural and Acquired Abilities’ and ‘excellent Moral Qualities’, and her mother 'a gentlewoman both of good estate and good extraction’. In 1619 the family moved to Sempringham, Lincolnshire, where Dudley became chief steward to the estates of Theophilus Clinton, fourth earl of Lincoln, the son of the third earl Thomas and his wife the
countess, Elizabeth Clinton (née Knyvett). The countesse of Lincolnes nurserie (1622) was published while the Dudley family were in the Clinton household. Thomas Dudley was recommended to his position by the leading Puritan aristocrat of Broughton, Oxfordshire, William Fiennes, first Viscount Saye and Sele, whose daughter, Bridget, married the fourth earl in 1620; she was the countess of Lincoln with whom Thomas Dudley corresponded from New England. The Dudleys’ close association with some of the leading families of early Stuart Puritanism in England provides an insight into Anne Bradstreet’s early intellectual formation. Along with her father’s example and encouragement of reading across a wide range of subjects, including classical as well as English and French literature, history, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and natural science, and his encouragement of her writing (he too was a poet), Bradstreet had access to the earl of Lincoln’s books as well as a wider literary and intellectual coterie. It was during this period that she met Simon Bradstreet, the son of the Puritan minister (also Simon Bradstreet) of Horbling, Lincolnshire, who had arrived at the earl of Lincoln’s household in 1621. Thomas Dudley moved his family to Boston, Lincolnshire, in 1623, to join the congregation of St Botolph’s, then under the strongly Puritan preacher, John Cotton, who migrated to Boston, New England, in 1633. Anne Hutchinson travelled 24 miles to attend this same congregation, and was also a future migrant to America, though she was later tried and banished during the colony’s Antinomian Controversy.

Anne Dudley and the younger Simon Bradstreet married in 1628, when he was steward to Frances Rich, dowager countess of Warwick and mother of Robert Rich, second earl of Warwick, the most consistent supporter of the Puritan cause and its ministers. At the Warwick seat of Leighs Priory in Felstead, Essex, Anne Bradstreet probably knew and participated in the godly activities of the Rich household with the little-known Puritan woman writer, Lucy Robartes (née Rich, c.1615–1645/46), daughter of the second earl and her near contemporary in age.

The Bradstreets sailed for New England in March 1630 on board the flagship Arbella to New England, arriving in Salem, Massachusetts, on 12 June 1630. Thomas Dudley sailed with his family on the same ship as one of the founding members and shareholders of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and as deputy to John Winthrop's governorship of the new colony. Mather suggests that it was Bradstreet who encouraged her husband to agree to emigrate, although according to her account to her children she felt an initial reluctance: ‘I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined to the church at Boston.’ The Bradstreets lived for short periods in Charlestown, Boston, and Newtown (now Cambridge), before settling in Ipswich from 1635 until 1640 when they moved to Merrimack (now Andover). There is little evidence of Bradstreet’s activities beyond her home and family during this time, but her literary output was already making an artistic and intellectual contribution to English and American cultural posterity as early as 1642 when a manuscript collection of her poetry, dedicated to her father, was in circulation.

Bradstreet’s printed works consist of two volumes of poetry. The tenth muse lately sprung up in America, a small sextodecimo volume, was published in London in 1650 by her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, though only with the attribution, ‘By a Gentlewoman in those parts’. Several poems (1678) posthumously published Bradstreet’s additions to and corrections of The tenth muse and, as the title page states, ‘several other Poems found amongst her Papers after her Death’. The volume, also in sextodecimo size but greater in page length and with a larger typeface, was printed by John Foster in Boston. The volume also printed further poetic epitaphs written in Bradstreet’s honour, including ‘Upon Mrs. Anne Bradstreet her poems, & c.’, by the president of Harvard College, John Rogers, and the Puritan minister John Norton’s funeral elegy on Bradstreet.
As the first Anglo-American to publish poetry, and arriving in New England at the age of 17, Bradstreet exhibits in her poems an ongoing dual allegiance. The tenth muse gives notice of her new location in its full title and in the appended poem 'In praise of the Author ... At present residing in the Occidentall parts of the World, in America, alias NOV-ANGLIA'. The allegiance, however, is rooted in Bradstreet's firm commitment to an international radical Protestantism. 'A dialogue between Old England and New; concerning their present troubles, Anno, 1642' is styled as a poetic exchange between mother and daughter. It is the younger 'New England' who frames the dialogue, and mother England responds to her questions with passionate laments on the origins of the religio-political crisis at the root of the English Civil War. Bradstreet clearly indicates the colony's ongoing concern for home: 'And for my self let miseries abound, / If mindless of thy State I e're be found.' Extensive evidence of transatlantic correspondence between the English and American Puritan communities contemporary with Bradstreet's poem testify that this mindfulness was sustained. England's turmoil is described from the characteristic Puritan Parliamentarian perspective upon her 'breach of sacred Laws', 'Idolatry', 'foolish Superstitious Adoration', the threat of papal insurgency, 'Sabbath-breaking' and drunkenness, 'The Gospel trodden down' and 'Church Offices ... bought for gain'. The voice of the daughter points to the future, proposing an outlook of eschatological hope by reminding her in covenantal terms:

Oh Abraham's seed lift up your heads on high,
For sure the day of your Redemption's nigh ...
Then follows dayes of happiness and rest;
Whose lot doth fall to live therein is blest:
No Canaanite shall then be found i'th' Land,
And holiness on horses bells shall stand.

Among Bradstreet's early poems are elegiac homages to her literary and other influences. In these 'Elegies and epitaphs' she registers both appropriate praise and a degree of regard for herself as a poet in her own right. For instance, 'An elegie upon that honourable and renowned knight Sir Philip Sidney' positions the poet as inadequate to celebrate her subject: 'The more I say, the more thy worth I stain, / Thy fame and praise is far beyond my strain.' In the same form of heroic couplets, she wrote the elegy 'In honour of that high and mighty princess Queen Elizabeth', defending the legitimacy of female monarchical rule and women's sufficiency of reason: 'She hath wip'd off th' aspersion of her Sex,/That women wisdome lack to play the Rex', and downplaying her own claim to literary credit: 'my pride doth but aspire / To read what others write, and so admire.' However, Bradstreet's feminist argument is unequivocal and is here conveyed with witty rhetorical questions:

Now say, have women worth? Or have they none?
Or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?
Nay Masculines, you have thus taxt 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.

Bradstreet also recorded a deep literary and intellectual debt to the French Huguenot poet Guillaume de Salluste, sieur du Bartas, of whom she claimed 'A thousand thousand times my senseless senses / Moveless stand charm'd by thy sweet influences' ('On Du Bartas, 1641'). The Puritan clergyman Nathaniel Ward noted that Bradstreet was 'a right Du Bartas Girle', and the influence of Du Bartas was pre-emptively noted in her dedication of Several poems to her father, warning that she 'fear'd you'd judge Du Bartas was my friend /I honour him, but dare not wear his wealth' ('The epistle dedicatory').
Bradstreet finds both stylistic and substantive sources in Du Bartas, and her quaternions – *The four elements* (composed 1641–43), *The four constitutions* (1641–43), *The four ages of man* (1643), and *The four seasons of the year* (1643) – are both an imitation of his *Devine weekes and workes* (1605; translated into English by Joshua Sylvester in 1621), and of Thomas Dudley's own quaternions: 'I bring my four times four, now meanly clad / To do homage, unto yours, full glad' ('The epistle dedicatory'). They also draw on Helkiah Crooke's anatomical treatise, *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), among many other sources of natural philosophy and biblical commentary.

The quaternions (four long poems of four parts each) are perhaps the most technically and intellectually ambitious of Bradstreet's poetic works, although they are often placed amongst her earlier and less-well-regarded poems: they are judged as 'wooden' and 'forced' (Rich 1967), 'bald / Didactic rime' (Berryman 1989), and typical of Bradstreet's juvenilia. They are also generally neglected in anthologies of seventeenth-century poetry. In a format of four related debates – the first two of which have solely female speakers (sisters) – she describes and classifies the world according to categories of the four elements, humours, ages, and seasons, at the same time exhibiting extensive classical, geographical, theological, and scientific knowledge and reasoning. Their composition also coincided with the Massachusetts Bay Colony's mandate that all children be taught literacy, and thus were possibly also designed to be didactic texts, systematizing knowledge for a pedagogical context, possibly a 'dame school' in which Bradstreet taught her own children and others. A similar tone of questioning and debate between sisters recurs in the later poem 'The flesh and the spirit', on the struggle to quench the 'unregenerate part' and pursue a 'setled heart'.

Following the four long, four-part poems is an incomplete poem, 'The four monarchies', a biblical history in heroic couplets of iambic pentameter, influenced by Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the world* (1614) and based on the four kingdoms represented in the book of Daniel: Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. This work was abandoned after her papers were destroyed by fire, an event Simon Bradstreet also noted in his diary when he lost his books and papers, and his father a library of 800 volumes. Bradstreet later revisited this event in manuscript, in 'Some verses upon the burning of our house, July 10th, 1666', and she turned the loss of her books and papers into a broader moral reflection on the undulating fortunes of civilizations throughout history. In the 'Apology' printed at the end of the fourth, (incomplete) part, 'Roman monarchy', she speculates on the poem's incompletion in the light of these fortunes:

No more I'le do sith I have suffer'd wrack,  
Although my Monarchies their legs do lack:  
Nor matter is't this last, the world now sees,  
Hath many Ages been upon his knees.

During the years in which she composed the quaternions, Bradstreet wrote four epistolary poems to her husband. The first, 'To my dear and loving husband', opens with the well-known lines, 'If ever two were one, then surely we. / If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee.' The second, 'To her husband, absent upon publick employment', develops the same theme: 'If two be one, as surely thou and I, / How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lye?'

One of Bradstreet's most admired works is 'Contemplations', the 33-stanza emblem poem written at Andover and published in the 1678 volume. Appreciation for the poem's artistry and complexity has developed since her nineteenth-century editor J. H. Ellis (1867) declared that it 'proves she had true poetic feeling, and ... could rise when she was willing to throw aside her musty folios and read the fresh
book of nature’. Bradstreet’s accomplishment has been critically situated in terms of her intellectual and literary influences, including conventional emblem forms, classical and biblical allusions, the Neoplatonism of Sidney and Edmund Spenser, Protestant devotional exercises and Puritan sermons. The poem is set by the river Merrimack, with the poet’s eyes looking first at ‘the autumnal tide’, then lifting to gaze at ‘a stately oak’, and finally rising to the ‘glistening Sun’. Her magnification of God’s majesty is inspired by the earth’s intricate natural harmony: the revelation of God is discerned in Creation, and reflections on Creation consistently prompt a scriptural association. The poem reviews biblical history and the New Testament redemption narrative and concludes with her literary Calvinist devotion to enduring faith in the context of election.

‘The Author to her book’ is among the most celebrated poems within the authorized 1678 collection. Bradstreet here demonstrates her capacity for self-reflection as an author, modelling the modesty of unexpected publication – her works were ‘snatcht’ and ‘expos’d’ ‘by friends’. However, the poem opens with the metaphoric casting of her book as ‘ill-form’d offspring’, suggesting that her maternal attitude towards her literary production was not an apology to a patriarchal literary culture for her inclination to write, but rather an expression of pride in her capacity for an improved literary aesthetic. She denies the role of a ‘Father’ figure in the poem’s creation, and possibly even admits to a degree of complicity in the publication: ‘And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,/Which caus’d her thus to send thee out of door.’

The ‘Andover’ manuscript writings were first printed in 1867 from the leather-bound notebook in Bradstreet’s hand, part of which she titled ‘Meditations diuine and morall’. Over 20 pages of this book feature her son Simon’s copying of another of her manuscript books. The first section is a short epistolary autobiography addressed ‘To my dear children’, a legacy designed for posterity and for them to ‘Make vse of’. She relates her ‘experiences of God’s gratious Dealings’ since her ‘young years, about 6 or 7’ when she ‘began to make conscience of [her] wayes and what… was sinfull’. The account records her consumptive illness not long after her arrival in America, which she interpreted as sent by God ‘to humble and try me and doe mee Good’. It was, she notes, ‘not altogether ineffectuall’, and is marked in one of her earliest poems, ‘Upon a fit of sickness, Anno. 1632’. It was a ‘great greif’ to her to be kept from conceiving a child ‘a long time’, although after her first, Samuel, in 1633, Bradstreet went on to have seven more children: Dorothy, Sarah, Simon, Hannah, Mercy, Dudley, and John. The legacy also describes how God dealt with her during times of affliction and doubt and her experiences of answered prayer; it is peppered with biblical paraphrases, particularly from the Psalms and the Pauline epistles. Several meditations follow in both prose and lyric, mostly dated between 1656 and 1661, with direct addresses made to her children as well as poems on various personal themes, including her bouts of illness and the safe travels of her son Samuel, with several on her husband’s travels and absence, on letters received from her husband, on her daughter Hannah’s recovery from a fever, and on further spiritual themes. Bradstreet’s psalms also appear in the manuscripts, technically and thematically imitating the Geneva Bible’s rendering of the Psalms and the Bay psalm book, the metrical translation designed for use in worship and used in the Colony.

The last of Bradstreet’s extant poems was dated 31 August 1669, three years before her death. ‘As weary pilgrim’ represents a waning interest in the present world, and concludes in the same tone as the final words of Revelation: ‘Lord make me ready for that day/ then Come deare bridgome Come away.’ Bradstreet died from consumption on 16 September 1672. Though absent from her, her son Simon recorded ‘her pious & memorable Expressions uttered in her sickness’. Edward Phillips, John Milton's
nephew, memorialized her in *Theatrum poetarum* (1675) as ‘a New-England poetess, no less in title’, and Cotton Mather lavished the following praise on her poems in his *Magnalia* (1702), as having ‘afforded a grateful Entertainment unto the Ingenious, and a Monument for her Memory beyond the Stateliest Marbles’.

SEE ALSO: Cavendish, Margaret; Clinton, Elizabeth; Crooke, Helkiah; psalms and psalters, metrical; Raleigh, Walter; Rich, Mary; Sidney, Philip; Spenser, Edmund

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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