



*The Works of  
Anne Bradstreet*

*Edited by  
Jeannine Hensley*

*Foreword by  
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# ANNE BRADSTREET AND HER POETRY

BY ADRIENNE RICH

1630: the expected sea-voyage with its alternations of danger and boredom, three months of close quarters and raw nerves, sickness and hysteria and salt meats; finally the wild coast of Massachusetts Bay, the blazing heat of an American June, the half-dying, famine-ridden frontier village of Salem, clinging to the edge of an incalculable land-mass.

*"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."* Sixty years later she was to write that. Other hearts had hesitated, at the first view of the same world and its manners. Anne Bradstreet's heart rose against much that lay before her, much too that had come along with her in the *Arbella*. She was eighteen, two years married, out of a civilized and humane background. Her father, Thomas Dudley, a man of education and worldly experience, had been steward to an earl; her mother, by Cotton Mather's account, "a gentlewoman whose extraction and estates were considerable." Her own education had been that of the clever girl in the cultivated seventeenth century house: an excellent library, worldly talk, the encouragement of a literate father who loved history. Her husband was a Cambridge man, a Nonconformist minister's son. Her father, her husband, each was to serve as Governor of Massachusetts; she came to the wilderness as a woman of rank.

Younger, Anne Bradstreet had struggled with a "carnall heart." Self-scrutiny, precisianism, were in any event expected of Puritan young people. But her doubts, her "sitting loose



from God,” were underscored by uncommon intelligence and curiosity. Once in Massachusetts, in a society coarsened by hardship and meagre in consolations, any religious doubt must at times have made everything seem dubious. Her father wrote back to England a year after their arrival:

If there be any endued with grace . . . let them come over . . . For others, I conceive they are not yet fitted for this business.

. . . There is not a house where is not one dead, and some houses many . . . the natural causes seem to be in the want of warm lodging and good diet, to which Englishmen are habituated at home, and the sudden increase of heat which they endure that are landed here in summer . . . for those only these two last years died of fevers who landed in June or July, as those of Plymouth, who landed in winter, died of the scurvy.<sup>1</sup>

To read and accept God’s will, not only in the deaths of friends, but in one’s own frequent illness, chronic lameness, political tension between one’s father and Governor Winthrop, four changes of house in eight years, difficulty in conceiving a child, private and public anxiety and hardship, placed a peculiar burden of belief and introspection on an intellectually active, sensually quick spirit.

Seventeenth-century Puritan life was perhaps the most self-conscious ever lived in its requirements of the individual understanding: no event so trivial that it could not speak a divine message, no disappointment so heavy that it could not serve as a “correction,” a disguised blessing. Faith underwent its hourly testing, the domestic mundanities were episodes in the drama; the piecemeal thoughts of a woman stirring a pot, clues to her “justification” in Christ. A modern consciousness looks almost enviously upon the intense light of significance under which those lives were lived out: “everything had a meaning then,” we say, as if that had ever held alert and curious minds back from perverse journeys:

<sup>1</sup> Augustine Jones, *Thomas Dudley, Second Governor of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1899), p. 449.



When I have got over this Block, then have I another put in my way,  
That admitt this be the true God whom we worship, and that be his  
word, yet why may not the Popish religion be the right? They have  
the same God, the same Christ, the same word: they only interpret it  
one way, we another.

Thus Anne Bradstreet described in her old age, for her children, what the substance of doubt had been. And if Archbishop Laud and the Hierarchists back in England were right, what was one doing, after all, on that stretch of intemperate coast, hoarding fuel, hoarding corn, dragging one's half-sick self to the bedsides of the dying? What was the meaning of it all? One's heart rose in rebellion.

Still, she was devotedly, even passionately married, and through husband and father stood close to the vital life of the community. (Her father was a magistrate at the trial of Anne Hutchinson, the other, heretical, Anne, who threatened the foundations of the colony and "gloried" in her excommunication.) And her mind was alive. Thomas Dudley's library had passed to the New World, and the early childless years, for all their struggles with theology and primitive surroundings, left time, energy to go on reading and thinking. The Bible was the air she and everyone else breathed; but she also knew Raleigh's *History of the World*, Camden's *Annals of Queen Elizabeth*, *Piers Plowman*, Sidney's poems; and she was deeply impressed by Joshua Sylvester's translation of Guillaume Du Bartas' *La Sepmaine du Creation*.<sup>2</sup>

*The Divine Weekes and Works*, as this elephantine poem was called in English, was an acknowledged popular masterpiece. Du Bartas, the leading French Calvinist poet, was admired as a peer of Ronsard. Sylvester was not his only English translator: Philip Sidney among others had been moved to undertake a version. Sylvester's own poetry had been praised—in verse blurbs—by Samuel Daniel and Ben

<sup>2</sup> See Jones, *Thomas Dudley*, p. 260, for a partial listing of books in Dudley's library.



Jonson.<sup>3</sup> Milton had pillaged *The Divine Weekes* in composing *Paradise Lost*. Anne Bradstreet was thus showing no provinciality of taste in her response to Du Bartas. His poem was, in fact, as one scholar has exhaustively shown, a perfect flea-market of ideas, techniques, and allusions for the Puritan poet.<sup>4</sup> Crammed with popular science, catalogues of diseases, gems, fauna, and flora, groaning with hypotheses on the free will of angels, or God's occupation before the First Day, quivering with excesses, laborious and fascinating as some enormous serpent winding endlessly along and forever earth-bound, *The Divine Weekes* has, yet, a vitality of sheer conviction about it; one can understand its mesmeric attraction for an age unglutted by trivial or pseudo-momentous information. And this poem, sublime at least in its conception, was directly concerned with the most gripping drama recognized by the seventeenth-century mind.

One thing is clear, when one actually reads Anne Bradstreet's early verse by the side of her master Du Bartas: however much she may have admired his "haughty Stile and rapted wit sublime," she almost never lapsed into his voice. Her admiration was in large measure that of a neophyte bluestocking for a man of wide intellectual attainments; in emulating him she emulated above all:

Thy Art in natural Philosophy,  
Thy Saint-like mind in grave Divinity,  
Thy piercing skill in high Astronomy,  
And curious insight in Anatomy: . . .  
Thy Physick, musick and state policy . . .

She was influenced more by Du Bartas' range and his encyclopaedic conception of poetry, than by his stylistic qualities. That early verse of hers, most often pedestrian, abstract, mechanical, rarely becomes elaborately baroque; at its best her

<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Works of Joshua Sylvester* (Edinburgh, 1880), I, xxxvi ff., 13 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See George Coffin Taylor, *Milton's Use of Du Bartas* (Cambridge, 1934).



style, even in these apprentice pieces, has a plain modesty and directness which owe nothing to Du Bartas.<sup>5</sup> She feels herself in his shadow, constantly disclaims the ability to write like him, even if she would; but she seems further to have had reservations about mere imitation of even so stylish a model: "My goods are true (though poor) I love no stealth."

Versifying was not an exceptional pursuit in that society; poetry, if edifying in theme, was highly recommended to the Puritan reader. (A century later Cotton Mather was finding it necessary to caution the orthodox against "a Boundless and Sickly Appetite, for the Reading of Poems, which now the Rickety Nation swarms withal.")<sup>6</sup> Unpublished verse manuscripts circulated in New England before the first printing press began operation. By her own admission, Anne Bradstreet began her verse-making almost accidentally:

My subject's bare, my brain is bad,  
Or better lines you should have had:  
The first fell in so naturally,  
I knew not how to pass it by . . .

Thus ends her *Quaternion*, or four poems of four books each, written somewhere between 1630 and 1642. Her expositions of "The Humours," "The Ages of Man," "The Seasons," and "The Elements," and above all her long historical poem, "The Four Monarchies," read like a commonplace book put into iambic couplets, the historical, scientific journal of a young woman with a taste for study. Had she stopped writing after the publication of these verses, or had she simply continued in the same vein, Anne Bradstreet would survive in the catalogues of Women's Archives, a social curiosity or at best a literary fossil. The talent exhibited in them was of a

<sup>5</sup> To judge from its "Dedication," her *Quaternion* may have owed its inception as much to a poem written by her father on "The Four Parts of the World" as to *The Divine Weekes*.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Murdock quotes this in his *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, 1949) from Mather's *Manductio ad Ministerium*, 1726.



kind acceptable to her time and place, but to a later eye indistinct from masses of English verse of the period.

The seventeenth-century Puritan reader was not, however, in search of “new voices” in poetry. If its theme was the individual in his experience of God, the final value of a poem lay in its revelation of God and not the individual. Least of all in a woman poet would radical powers be encouraged. Intellectual intensity among women gave cause for uneasiness: the unnerving performance of Anne Hutchinson had disordered the colony in 1636, and John Winthrop wrote feelingly in 1645 of

a godly young woman, and of special parts, who was fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding, and reason, which had been growing upon her divers years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and written many books.

Anne Bradstreet’s early work may be read, or skimmed, against this background. Apart from its technical amateurishness, it is remarkably impersonal even by Puritan standards. She was receiving indelible impressions during those years between her arrival in New England and the publication of her verses in 1650. But she appears to have written by way of escaping from the conditions of her experience, rather than as an expression of what she felt and knew. New England never enters her book except as the rather featureless speaker in a “Dialogue Between Old and New England”; the landscape, the emotional weather of the New World are totally absent; the natural descriptions in her “Four Seasons” woodenly reproduce England, like snow-scenes on Australian Christmas cards. Theology, a subject with which her prose memoir tells us she was painfully grappling, is touched on in passing. Personal history—marriage, childbearing, death—is similarly excluded from the book which gave her her contemporary reputation. These long, rather listless pieces seem to have been composed in a last compulsive effort to stay in



contact with the history, traditions, and values of her former world; nostalgia for English culture, surely, kept her scribbling at those academic pages, long after her conviction had run out. Present experience was still too raw, one sought relief from its daily impact in turning Raleigh and Camden into rhymed couplets, recalling a scenery and a culture denied by the wilderness. Yet it is arguable that the verse which gained her serious acceptance in her own time was a psychological stepping-stone to the later poems which have kept her alive for us.

When, in 1650, Anne Bradstreet's brother-in-law returned to England, he carried along without her knowledge a manuscript containing the verses she had copied out for family circulation. This he had published in London under the title, *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up In America*. There was considerable plotting among friends and family to launch the book. Nathaniel Ward, the "Simple Cobbler of Agawam" and former neighbor of the Bradstreets, wrote a blurb in verse, rather avuncular and condescending. Woodbridge, the brother-in-law, himself undertook to explain in a foreword that the book

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 discreet managing of her Family occasions, and more than so, these Poems are but the fruit of some few houres, curtailed from her sleepe and other refreshments.

Mixed feelings entered the woman's proud and self-critical soul when the printed volume was laid, with due mystery and congratulation, in her lap. "The Author To Her Book" makes this abundantly clear. *She* had not given the "rambling brat" leave to stray beyond the family circle. Fond relatives, "less wise than true," had connived under her nose to spread abroad what they knew she had "resolved in such a manner should never see the Sun." The seductions of print, the first



glamor of success, were paid for by the exposure of weakness, by irritation at the printer's errors which only compounded her own. Ward's jocular praise—"a right Du Bartas Girle . . . I muse whither at length these Girles would go"—surely stung the woman who wrote:

If what I do prove well, it won't advance.  
They'l say it's stoln, or else it was by chance.

But she was a spirited woman with a strong grasp on reality; and temperament, experience, and the fact of having reached a wider audience converged at this period to give Anne Bradstreet a new assurance. Her poems were being read seriously by strangers, though not in the form she would have chosen to send them out. Her intellectual delight was no longer vulnerable to carping ("They'l say my hand a needle better fits"); it was a symptom neither of vanity nor infirmity; she had carried on her woman's life conscientiously while composing her book. It is probable that some tension of self-distrust was relaxed, some inner vocation confirmed, by the publication and praise of *The Tenth Muse*. But the word "vocation" must be read in a special sense. Not once in her prose memoir does she allude to her poems, or to the publication of her book; her story, as written out for her children, is the familiar Puritan drama of temptation by Satan and correction by God. She would not have defined herself, even by aspiration, as an artist. But she had crossed the line between the amateur and the artist, where private dissatisfaction begins and public approval, though gratifying, is no longer of the essence. For the poet of her time and place, poetry might be merely a means to a greater end; but the spirit in which she wrote was not that of a dilettante.

Her revisions to *The Tenth Muse* are of little aesthetic interest. Many were made on political grounds, although a reading of North's Plutarch is supposed to have prompted insertions in "The Four Monarchies." What followed, how-



ever, were the poems which rescue Anne Bradstreet from the Women's Archives and place her conclusively in literature. A glance at the titles of her later poems reveals to what extent a real change in her active sensibility had taken place after 1650. No more Ages of Man, no more Assyrian monarchs; but poems in response to the simple events in a woman's life: a fit of sickness; her son's departure for England; the arrival of letters from her absent husband; the burning of their Andover house; a child's or grandchild's death; a walk in the woods and fields near the Merrimac River. At moments her heart still rises, the lines give back a suppressed note of outrage:

By nature Trees do rot when they are grown,  
 And Plumbs and Apples thoroughly ripe do fall,  
 And Corn and grass are in their season mown,  
 And time brings down what is both strong and tall.  
 But plants new set to be eradicate,  
 And buds new blown, to have so short a date,  
 Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate.

The delicacy and reticence of her expression at its best are seen in her poem, "Before The Birth of One of Her Children," which voices woman's age-old fear of death in childbirth, in the seventeenth century a thoroughly realistic apprehension. The poem is consequently a practical document, a little testament. Neither bathos nor self-indulgence cloud the economy of these lines; they are honest, tender and homely as a letter out of a marriage in which the lovers are also friends. The emotional interest of the poem lies in the human present and future; only in its conclusion does it gesture toward a hoped-for immortality. And the writer's pangs arise, not from dread of what lies after death, but from the thought of leaving a husband she loves and children half-reared.

That there is a God my reason would soon tell me by the wondrous works that I see, the vast frame of the heaven and the earth, the order of all things, night and day, summer and winter, spring and autumn,



the daily providing for this great household upon the earth, the preserving and directing of all to its proper end.

This theme, from her prose memoir, might be a text for the first part of her "Contemplations," the most skilled and appealing of her long poems. In its stanzas the poet wanders through a landscape of clarity and detail, exalting God's glory in nature; she becomes mindful, however, of the passing of temporal pleasure and the adversity that lies the other side of ease and sweetness. The landscape is more American than literary; it is clearly a sensuous resource and solace for the poet; but her art remains consistent in its intentions: "not to set forth myself, but the glory of God." It is of importance to bear this in mind, in any evaluation of Anne Bradstreet; it gives a peculiar poignancy to her more personal verse, and suggests an organic impulse toward economy and modesty of tone. Her several poems on recovery from illness (each with its little prose gloss recounting God's "correction" of her soul through bodily fevers and faintings) are in fact curiously impersonal as poetry; their four-foot-three-foot hymn-book metres, their sedulous meekness, their Biblical allusions, are the pure fruit of convention. Yet other occasional poems, such as "Upon the Burning of Our House," which spring from a similar motif, are heightened and individualized by references to things intimately known, life-giving strokes of personal fact:

When by the ruins oft I past  
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,  
And here and there the places spy  
Where oft I sat and long did lie:  
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,  
There lay that store I counted best.  
My pleasant things in ashes lie,  
And them behold no more shall I.  
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,  
Nor at thy table eat a bit.  
No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,



Nor things recounted done of old.  
No candle e'er shall shine in thee,  
Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be.

Upon the grounds of a Puritan aesthetic either kind of poem won its merit solely through doctrinal effectiveness; and it was within a Puritan aesthetic that Anne Bradstreet aspired and wrote. What is remarkable is that so many of her verses satisfy a larger aesthetic, to the extent of being genuine, delicate minor poems.

Until Edward Taylor, in the second half of the century, these were the only poems of more than historical interest to be written in the New World. Anne Bradstreet was the first non-didactic American poet, the first to give an embodiment to American nature, the first in whom personal intention appears to precede Puritan dogma as an impulse to verse. Not that she could be construed as a Romantic writing out of her time. The web of her sensibility stretches almost invisibly within the framework of Puritan literary convention; its texture is essentially both Puritan and feminine. Compared with her great successor, Taylor, her voice is direct and touching, rather than electrifying in its tensions or highly colored in its values. Her verses have at every point a transparency which precludes the metaphysical image; her eye is on the realities before her, or on images from the Bible. Her individualism lies in her choice of material rather than in her style.

The difficulty displaced, the heroic energy diffused in merely living a life, is an incalculable quantity. It is pointless, finally, to say that Poe or Hart Crane might have survived longer or written differently had either been born under a better star or lived in more encouraging circumstances. America has from the first levied peculiarly harsh taxes on its poets—physical, social, moral, through absorption as much as through rejection. John Berryman admits that in coming to write his long poem, *Homage to Mistress Brad-*



street, "I did not choose her—somehow she chose me—one point of connection being the almost insuperable difficulty of writing high verse at all in a land that cared and cares so little for it."<sup>7</sup> Still, with all stoic recognition of the common problem in each succeeding century including the last half-hour, it is worth observing that Anne Bradstreet happened to be one of the first American women, inhabiting a time and place in which heroism was a necessity of life, and men and women were fighting for survival both as individuals and as a community. To find room in that life for any mental activity which did not directly serve certain spiritual ends, was an act of great self-assertion and vitality. 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. If the severity of these confines left its mark on the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, it also forced into concentration and permanence a gifted energy that might, in another context, have spent itself in other, less enduring directions.

<sup>7</sup> From an interview in *Shenandoah*, Autumn, 1965. Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) reincarnates as only a great poem can the poetic facts of early New England.

## POSTSCRIPT

By ADRIENNE RICH

I wrote this foreword for the first printing of *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, published in 1967. Reading and writing about Bradstreet, I began to feel that furtive, almost guilty spark of identification so often kindled in me, in those days, by the life of another woman writer. There were real parallels between her life and mine. Like her, I had learned to read and write in my father's library; like her, I had known the ambiguities of patronizing compliments from male critics; like her, I suffered from chronic lameness; but above all, she was one of the few women writers I knew anything about who had also been a



mother. The tension between creative work and motherhood had occupied a decade of my life, although it is barely visible in the essay I wrote in 1966. This essay, in fact, shows the limitations of a point of view which took masculine history and literature as its center (e.g., the condescending references to "Women's Archives" on pp. xiii and xvii) and which tried from that perspective to view a woman's life and work.

Ten years later, lecturing at Douglass College on American women poets, I could raise questions which were unavailable to me when I wrote the Bradstreet essay: What did it really mean for women to come to a "new world"; in what sense and to what extent *was* it "new" for them? Do the lives of the women of a community change simply because that community migrates to another continent? (The question would have to be asked differently for the poet Phyllis Wheatley, brought to the "new world" as a slave.) What has been the woman poet's relationship to nature, in a land where both women and nature have, from the first, been raped and exploited? Much has been written, by white American male writers, of the difficulties of creating "great literature" at the edge of wilderness, in a society without customs and traditions. Were the difficulties the same for women? Could women attempt the same solutions? To what strategies have women poets resorted in order to handle dangerous and denigrated female themes and experiences? What did the warning of the midwife heretic Anne Hutchinson's fate mean for Anne Bradstreet? To what extent is Bradstreet's marriage poetry an expression of individual feeling, and where does it echo the Puritan ideology of marriage, including married love as the "duty" of every god-fearing couple? Where are the stress-marks of anger, the strains of self-division, in her work?

If such questions were unavailable to me in 1966, it was partly because of the silence surrounding the lives of women—not only our creative work, but the very terms on which that work has been created; and partly for lack of any intellectual community which would take those questions seriously. Yet they were there; unformed. I believe any woman for whom the feminist breaking of silence has been a transforming force can also look back to a time when the faint, improbable outlines of unaskable questions, curling in her brain cells, triggered a shock of recognition at certain lines, phrases, images, in the work of this or that woman, long dead, whose life and experience she could only dimly try to imagine.

NOTE: This postscript first appeared in Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (Norton, 1979).



