

Anne Bradstreet: Colonial America's First Published Poet and Her Sources of Inspiration

Posted on August 20, 2019

Introduction

Anne Bradstreet occupies a foundational place in early American literature. She is frequently called the first American poet, although a more historically accurate description is that she was the first published poet of colonial British America and the first English-speaking woman in the North American colonies to publish a volume of poetry. Her collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, appeared in London in 1650 and introduced readers on both sides of the Atlantic to an educated Puritan woman writing from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Bradstreet's achievement was remarkable because she wrote in a society that placed intellectual, domestic, and religious restrictions on women. Seventeenth-century women were generally expected to devote themselves to household management, motherhood, religious obedience, and support for their husbands. Literary ambition, especially the public circulation of poetry, could be viewed as inappropriate for a woman. Bradstreet nevertheless developed a substantial body of work that addressed history, religion, nature, marriage, motherhood, grief, illness, politics, and the position of women writers.

Her poetry did not emerge from a single source of inspiration. It grew from her privileged education in England, her father's encouragement, her reading of Renaissance poets, her admiration for the French Protestant poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, her Puritan faith, her marriage and family, and her difficult experiences in colonial New England. She was also inspired by the tension between her intellectual abilities and the limited social roles assigned to women.

Bradstreet did not simply reject Puritan culture or present herself as a modern campaigner for women's rights. Her position was more complicated. She accepted many of her society's religious and domestic values while subtly challenging the belief that intellectual and poetic achievement belonged exclusively to men. Her work reveals a writer negotiating between obedience and independence, humility and ambition, England and America, earthly affection and religious devotion. As Schweitzer (1988) argues, Bradstreet's poetry reflects an extended engagement with Renaissance traditions through which she gradually formed a distinctive poetic identity.

Early Life and Education

Anne Bradstreet was born Anne Dudley in Northamptonshire, England, around 1612. She grew up in a prosperous and politically influential Puritan family. Her father, Thomas Dudley, managed the estate of the Earl of Lincoln and later became a leading official in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This position gave Bradstreet access to books, educated religious leaders, political discussion, and literary culture that were unavailable to many women of her period.

Her father appears to have encouraged her education. Although Bradstreet did not attend a university, she read widely in history, theology, philosophy, poetry, and classical literature. Her writing demonstrates knowledge of the Bible, Greek and Roman history, European politics, medicine, astronomy, and the major poetic traditions of Renaissance England.

This education was one of the most important foundations of her literary career. Bradstreet's early poems are ambitious and scholarly, addressing subjects such as the four elements, the four seasons, the four ages of humanity, and the rise and fall of great empires. These subjects reflect the encyclopedic learning valued by Renaissance writers.

Bradstreet married Simon Bradstreet in 1628, when she was approximately 16 years old. In 1630, she travelled with her husband, parents, and other Puritan settlers to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The family eventually settled in communities including Ipswich, Andover, and North Andover. Bradstreet and her husband raised eight children, while Simon Bradstreet later served in several major political offices.

The move from England to New England was difficult for Bradstreet. She had left a comparatively comfortable and culturally established society for a colony struggling with harsh weather, disease, limited resources, political uncertainty, and the practical demands of settlement. Her identity was therefore shaped by two worlds. She remained emotionally and intellectually connected to England while gradually becoming one of the earliest literary voices associated with colonial America.

The Influence of the Elizabethan and Renaissance Traditions

Bradstreet's poetry developed within the English Renaissance literary tradition. She did not begin as a writer separated from European culture. Her language, forms, subjects, and poetic ambitions were shaped by authors whose work she had read before and after arriving in New England.

Among the English writers connected to Bradstreet's development were Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Sidney was admired as a courtier, soldier, Protestant hero, and poet. Spenser's poetry offered models of allegory, moral seriousness, elaborate form, and national identity. Bradstreet's early poems reveal her desire to enter this respected literary tradition, even though women were

often excluded from it.

Her elegy for Sidney demonstrates more than simple admiration. It allowed her to position herself within an established poetic lineage. Sauer (2021) argues that Bradstreet used her response to Sidney to reconsider ideas of ancestry, English identity, and poetic inheritance. Instead of receiving literary authority only through biological or aristocratic descent, she could establish a form of creative inheritance through reading and imitation.

Bradstreet's engagement with Renaissance literature was not passive. She learned established conventions and then adapted them to her own circumstances. In her early public poetry, she often demonstrated that a woman living in a distant colony could address the same historical, political, and religious subjects as educated male writers.

At the same time, her later work became more personal and direct. Poems about her husband, children, illness, grandchildren, home, and faith are now among her most frequently read works. This development does not mean that she abandoned Renaissance learning. Rather, she learned to combine formal literary techniques with experiences that male poets had often treated as private, domestic, or unsuitable for serious poetry.

Guillaume Du Bartas as a Major Literary Inspiration

One of Bradstreet's most important literary influences was Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, a sixteenth-century French Protestant poet. Du Bartas became widely known for *La Sepmaine*, or *The Divine Weeks and Works*, an ambitious poem about the creation of the world.

Du Bartas appealed to Protestant readers because he combined biblical themes with scientific, historical, and philosophical learning. His work showed that religious poetry could also be intellectually expansive. Bradstreet followed this example in poems that organized knowledge into broad historical and natural patterns.

Her admiration for Du Bartas is visible in her elegy written in his honour and in the structure of several poems collected in *The Tenth Muse*. Scholars have observed that Du Bartas provided Bradstreet with a model through which she could explore biblical history, nature, human knowledge, and poetic vocation. His influence was particularly strong in her longer and more scholarly compositions.

Yet Bradstreet eventually developed a voice that differed from her model. Du Bartas's poems are large in scale and often encyclopedic. Bradstreet's most distinctive later works frequently focus on intimate experiences. She brought poetic attention to pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, parental anxiety, bereavement, sickness, and the destruction of a family home.

Her development illustrates how literary influence works at its best. She did not merely copy Du

Bartas. She used his example to establish confidence and technique, then adapted poetry to express experiences rooted in her own life.

Puritan Faith and Biblical Inspiration

Puritan theology was another central source of Bradstreet's inspiration. Her family belonged to a Protestant movement that emphasized biblical authority, personal conversion, disciplined conduct, divine providence, and the need to examine one's spiritual condition.

The Bible shaped Bradstreet's language, imagery, moral concerns, and understanding of history. She interpreted both private suffering and public events through the belief that God governed human life. Illness, bereavement, migration, material loss, and political change could therefore become occasions for spiritual examination.

However, Bradstreet's religious poems do not always display effortless certainty. They often reveal tension between faith and emotional attachment. She understood the Puritan teaching that earthly possessions and relationships were temporary, but she also loved her family and home deeply.

This conflict is especially clear in "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House." After her family home was destroyed by fire, she attempted to interpret the loss as part of God's providence. She reminded herself that heavenly treasure mattered more than material property, declaring, "The world no longer let me love" (Bradstreet, 1981, p. 292). Yet the poem also records her grief as she remembers the rooms, belongings, and family experiences associated with the house.

The poem is powerful because Bradstreet does not pretend that religious faith eliminates emotional pain. Instead, faith gives her a language through which she struggles with that pain. Her poetry frequently moves between attachment and surrender, sorrow and trust, or questioning and acceptance.

This complexity is one reason her work remains significant. Bradstreet's religion is not merely a set of abstract doctrines. It is a lived practice tested by illness, mortality, loss, and uncertainty.

Marriage as a Source of Inspiration

Bradstreet's marriage to Simon Bradstreet inspired some of her most memorable poems. Her work challenges the assumption that Puritan marriage was necessarily cold, purely practical, or emotionally distant.

In "To My [Dear and Loving Husband](#)," she presents marital love as both earthly and spiritually meaningful. The poem begins, "If ever two were one, then surely we" (Bradstreet, 1981, p. 225). Through balanced phrases and direct declarations, Bradstreet portrays the marriage as a deep

partnership.

Her expression of romantic attachment is striking because it gives a Puritan woman an authoritative voice on desire, loyalty, and mutual devotion. She does not describe herself merely as an obedient wife. She speaks as a person who experiences and communicates intense affection.

The poem also connects marital love to eternity. Bradstreet hopes that the couple may continue to live through love even when physical life has ended. This movement from earthly affection toward eternal life reflects the broader tension in her poetry between human relationships and religious devotion.

Her letters and poems written during her husband's absences similarly convey loneliness and longing. These works show that domestic life was not a minor subject unworthy of literature. Bradstreet transformed private emotional experience into serious poetic material.

Motherhood, Family, and Personal Loss

Motherhood was another major source of Bradstreet's inspiration. She gave birth to eight children and experienced the physical danger, emotional vulnerability, and continuing responsibility associated with motherhood in the seventeenth century.

Her poem "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" addresses the possibility that she might die during childbirth. Rather than treating death as an abstract theological subject, Bradstreet imagines what her absence would mean for her husband and children. She asks her husband to remember her with love and to protect their children if she does not survive.

Bradstreet also wrote about the deaths of grandchildren. These elegies express grief while attempting to accept divine providence. The poems are emotionally restrained compared with modern confessional writing, but the restraint does not make the grief less genuine. Instead, it reflects a writer attempting to reconcile maternal affection with the belief that God has authority over life and death.

In "In Reference to Her Children," Bradstreet compares her children to birds raised in a nest and eventually released into the world. The extended metaphor allows her to reflect on motherhood as a process of nurturing and letting go.

These family poems demonstrate why Bradstreet's later voice is often considered more original than some of her early public verse. Instead of proving that she could reproduce established historical and literary forms, she made domestic experience a source of intellectual and artistic authority.

Her family did not distract her from becoming a poet. Marriage and motherhood became part of the material from which she created poetry.

Migration and the Colonial Experience

Bradstreet's relocation from England to Massachusetts also influenced her imagination. She arrived in a colony whose settlements were still developing and whose residents understood their migration in religious and political terms.

The Puritans hoped to establish a disciplined Christian society, but colonial life involved hardship, disease, political conflict, and uncertainty. Bradstreet initially struggled with leaving England, a country associated with family history, education, and cultural identity.

Her poem "A Dialogue Between Old England and New" presents the relationship between England and the colony through the voices of a mother and daughter. The poem responds to political and religious conflict in England while also revealing Bradstreet's continuing emotional connection to her birthplace.

The mother-daughter structure is significant. Bradstreet interprets international politics through a familial relationship, combining public history with a form often associated with women's domestic experience. She neither completely rejects England nor treats New England as culturally independent. Instead, the poem reflects a transatlantic identity.

Bradstreet's status as an Englishwoman becoming an American colonial poet is therefore essential to her legacy. Her writing stands at the beginning of a literary tradition that was still defining its relationship to Europe.

Gender Restrictions and the Inspiration to Write

The limitations placed on women did not simply obstruct Bradstreet's writing. They also became a subject and source of creative energy.

Women in Bradstreet's society were commonly associated with domestic work, modesty, obedience, and silence in public affairs. A woman who displayed extensive learning or sought literary recognition risked criticism for stepping beyond her proper role.

Bradstreet addresses this prejudice directly in "The Prologue." She imagines hostile readers who claim that "my hand a needle better fits" (Bradstreet, 1981, p. 16). The line represents the belief that sewing and household labour were appropriate for women, while writing belonged to men.

Bradstreet responds strategically. She appears modest and avoids claiming superiority over male poets, but she also exposes the unfairness of the judgment. She observes that if a woman produces good work, critics may insist that someone else wrote it or that she succeeded only by chance.

Her use of humility should not be interpreted too simply. Expressions of modesty were conventional in

Renaissance writing, and female authors faced particular pressure to present themselves as unthreatening. Bradstreet could use modest language while still asserting her intelligence and defending women's creative abilities.

Schweitzer (1988) interprets this tension as part of Bradstreet's struggle with Renaissance literary authority. She both participates in established poetic traditions and questions the gender assumptions on which those traditions rested.

It would be an exaggeration to describe Bradstreet as a modern feminist campaigning publicly for complete political and legal equality. Her work generally remains within a Christian and domestic framework. Nevertheless, she challenged the idea that women lacked intellectual ability and demonstrated through her own success that a woman could master learned poetry.

Her most powerful argument was ultimately the poetry itself.

The Publication of *The Tenth Muse*

Bradstreet's first collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, was published in London in 1650. Her brother-in-law, Reverend John Woodbridge, carried the manuscript to England and arranged its publication.

The title page identified the author only as "a gentlewoman in those parts." Introductory endorsements from respected men assured readers that Bradstreet was a virtuous woman who had not neglected her domestic responsibilities. These endorsements reveal how unusual and potentially controversial female authorship could be.

The collection contained ambitious poems on history, nature, politics, religion, and human life. Its publication gave Bradstreet recognition in both England and the colonies. The book received favourable attention and established her as an important New World writer.

The traditional account states that the collection was published without Bradstreet's knowledge. In "The Author to Her Book," she presents the printed volume as a poorly formed child taken from her and exposed publicly before she could correct it.

Modern scholarship has complicated the image of Bradstreet as a completely unwilling author. The language of reluctance may partly reflect the modesty expected of women writers and the need to protect her reputation. The publication process and family endorsements suggest that her public authorship was more carefully negotiated than the story of a secretly removed manuscript implies.

This does not mean that her embarrassment was insincere. She may genuinely have disliked errors in the published volume and felt anxious about public judgment. At the same time, her poetic response displays confidence, wit, and control. By comparing authorship to motherhood, she claims authority over the book as her own creation.

Public Poetry and Personal Poetry

Bradstreet's work is often divided into public and personal poetry. Her public poems address large subjects such as empires, English political conflict, natural order, and human history. They demonstrate learning and position her within Renaissance literary culture.

Her personal poems focus on marriage, children, illness, death, faith, and household experience. These poems are generally more concise and emotionally direct.

The distinction is useful, but the two categories should not be separated too sharply. Bradstreet brings personal and domestic imagery into public subjects, while her family poems raise larger theological and philosophical questions.

A poem about a burning house becomes a meditation on material attachment and eternal life. A love poem becomes an exploration of marriage and immortality. A poem about childbirth examines mortality, memory, and responsibility. Domestic experience becomes a way of thinking about universal concerns.

This combination is one of Bradstreet's most important contributions to literary history. She demonstrated that women's lives could provide material for serious poetry without abandoning formal craftsmanship or intellectual depth.

Illness, Mortality, and Spiritual Self-Examination

Bradstreet experienced recurring illness throughout her life. Physical weakness and the high mortality rates of the seventeenth century made death a continuing presence in her writing.

Her poems and prose meditations frequently examine the temporary nature of the body and the uncertainty of earthly life. Yet her treatment of mortality is rarely cold or detached. Death matters because she values life, family, memory, and love.

Illness sometimes deepened her religious devotion, but it could also provoke questions. Bradstreet's spiritual writings reveal periods of doubt, anxiety, and renewed faith. She does not present herself as someone who never struggles. Instead, she portrays belief as something repeatedly tested and recovered.

This honesty gives her religious poetry emotional credibility. Her faith is not based on the absence of suffering. It develops through her attempts to understand suffering.

Bradstreet died in Massachusetts in 1672. A revised and expanded edition of her poetry, *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning*, appeared posthumously in Boston in 1678. This edition included many of the personal poems for which she is now best known.

Was Anne Bradstreet a Reluctant Poet?

Bradstreet is sometimes portrayed as a reluctant poet who wrote privately and accidentally became famous. This image contains some truth but can also underestimate her ambition.

Her poetry frequently uses modesty, self-criticism, and apology. These strategies helped her operate within a culture suspicious of female authorship. However, she also revised her work, engaged major literary figures, addressed political and historical subjects, and considered how readers would judge her.

A writer with no concern for literary achievement would be unlikely to produce such ambitious poems or respond so carefully to publication. Her humility and ambition existed together.

Bradstreet wanted to remain recognizable as a respectable Puritan woman, but she also wanted her intellectual and poetic abilities to be taken seriously. Her writing is powerful precisely because it emerges from this conflict.

She did not simply abandon the identity of wife, mother, and believer in order to become a poet. She made those identities part of her authority as a poet.

Bradstreet's Literary Legacy

Anne Bradstreet helped establish the possibility of a literary tradition in [colonial America](#). Her work connected the new settlements to European literary culture while also giving poetic form to experiences specific to migration and colonial life.

She was also an important predecessor for American women writers. Elaine Showalter (2009) begins her history of American women's writing with Bradstreet because her career demonstrates both the obstacles faced by women and the strategies they used to claim literary authority.

Her importance extends beyond being the first. A writer should not be remembered only because she appeared earlier than others. Bradstreet remains valuable because her poems continue to speak about conflicts that readers recognize: the struggle between ambition and social expectation, the fear of losing loved ones, the pain of material loss, the challenge of faith, and the desire for one's work to survive.

Her poetry also complicates simple accounts of Puritan life. She was religious without being emotionally empty, domestically committed without being intellectually passive, and socially modest without lacking artistic ambition.

Bradstreet created a voice capable of moving between public history and private grief, between European learning and colonial experience, and between obedience to tradition and resistance to

gender prejudice.

Conclusion

Anne Bradstreet was not merely the first poet associated with colonial America to achieve publication. She was a learned and inventive writer who transformed numerous influences into a distinctive literary voice.

Her father's encouragement and access to books gave her an unusual intellectual foundation. Renaissance poets such as Sidney and Spenser connected her to the English literary tradition, while Du Bartas provided a model of ambitious Protestant poetry. Her Puritan faith inspired biblical reflection and shaped her attempts to understand suffering, providence, and mortality.

Her husband, children, illnesses, bereavements, migration, and material losses supplied the emotional substance of her most enduring poems. The restrictions placed on women created obstacles, but they also gave her a subject against which she could test her poetic identity.

Bradstreet did not openly reject every expectation of Puritan womanhood. Instead, she worked within its language while quietly expanding what a woman could say and accomplish. She used humility without surrendering authority, domestic experience without sacrificing intellectual seriousness, and faith without hiding doubt or grief.

Her achievement lies in the way she united apparently opposing identities. She was English and colonial, domestic and public, Puritan and Renaissance, obedient and questioning, modest and ambitious. Through this complexity, she became more than a historical "first." She became a major poetic voice whose work helped define the beginnings of American literature and opened a path for generations of women writers.

References

Bradstreet, A. (1981). *The works of Anne Bradstreet* (J. Hensley, Ed.). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Campbell, H. (1891). *Anne Bradstreet and her time*. D. Lothrop Company.

Pender, P. (2012). Anne Bradstreet and the romance of "pirated" publication. In *Early modern women's writing: Domesticity, privacy, and the public sphere in England and the Dutch Republic*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sauer, E. (2021). Transatlantic lifelines: Anne Bradstreet's "Elegie upon that Honourable and Renowned Knight, Sir Philip Sidney." *Humanities*, 10(4), Article 122.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040122>

Schweitzer, I. (1988). Anne Bradstreet wrestles with the Renaissance. *Early American Literature*, 23(3), 291-312.

Showalter, E. (2009). *A jury of her peers: American women writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Waller, J. R. (1974). "My hand a needle better fits": Anne Bradstreet and women poets in the Renaissance. *The Dalhousie Review*.