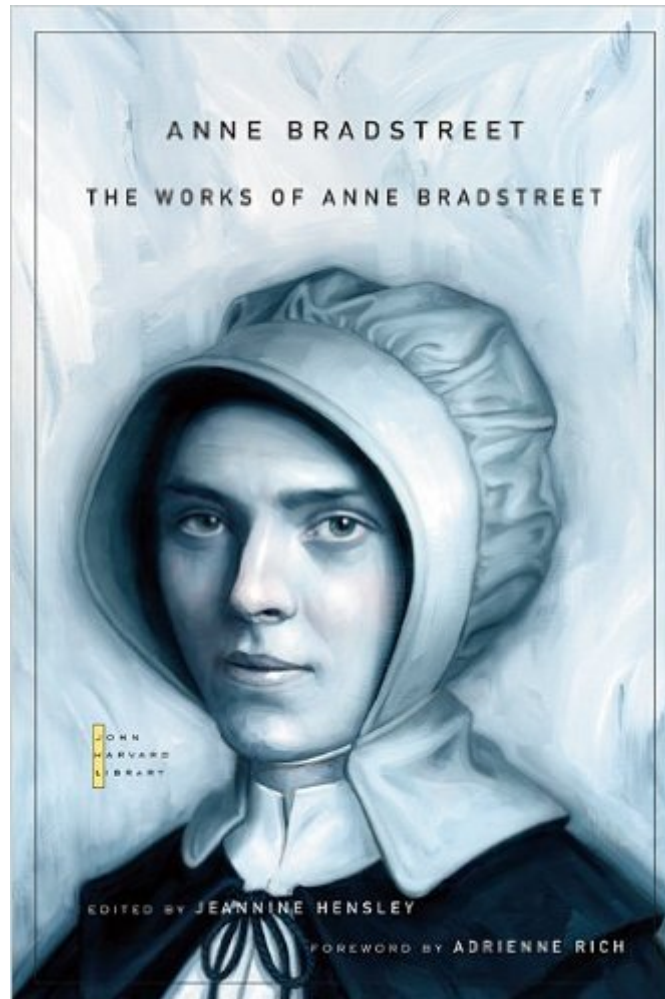


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The Works Of Anne Bradstreet (The John Harvard Library)



Synopsis

Anne Bradstreet was one of our earliest feminists and the first true poet in the American colonies. This collection of her extant poetry and prose, scrupulously edited by Jeannine Hensley, has long been the standard edition of Bradstreet's work. Hensley's introduction sketches the poet's life, and Adrienne Rich's foreword offers a sensitive critique of Bradstreet as a person and as a writer. The John Harvard Library edition includes a chronology of Bradstreet's life and an updated bibliography.

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Customer Reviews

Anne Bradstreet is generally considered to be the first serious poet of the American colonies and one of its first female writers. Born in England in 1612, Bradstreet was raised and educated in a comfortable English home before traveling to the New World when she was 16 to seek religious freedom: she and her family were Puritans. Her poems, written in New England and distributed among family members, were taken to England in 1650 for publication without Bradstreet's knowledge. A second edition, with additional poems (and Bradstreet's blessing) was published during her lifetime and then a third, with still additional poems, was published posthumously. Finally, a fourth edition was published in 1867 which included previously unpublished Bradstreet writings known as the Andover Collection. The new John Harvard Library edition, a reprint of its definitive 1967 collection, includes all previously published material as well as an updated bibliography and a

Bradstreet chronology. Understanding the initial poems in this collection is greatly enhanced by the foreword and introduction (by Adrienne Rich and Jeanine Hensley, respectively) which explain that Bradstreet was trying to keep her English education alive in the colonial wilderness by writing extremely long, erudite poems having little to do with her surroundings: "The Four Elements," "Of the Four Humours," "Of the Four Ages," "Of the Four Seasons," and "The Four Monarchies." The first edition also included a fairly lengthy poem praising, in great detail, the reign of Queen Elizabeth while it simultaneously questions the unfairness of gender issues: . . . Now say, have women worth? Or have they none? Or had they some, but with our Queen is gone? Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long, But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong. Let such as say our sex if void of reason, Know 'tis a slander now but once was treason. Apart from several fascinating poems such as this one, many of Bradstreet's early works, appreciated at the time of their publication, suffer a bit of a disconnect from 21st century readers, especially the lengthy ones previously mentioned. But these writings were apparently essential preparations for the more strikingly personal poems that followed, those that are most often anthologized and known in this century by students of early American literature, such as "To My Dear and Loving Husband," a poem originally published in the third collection: 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. I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold Or all the riches that the East doth hold . . . Another poem from this collection called "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" reveals Bradstreet's fear of death only because it means parting from her loved ones: . . . If any worth of virtue were in me, Let that live freshly in thy memory And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms, Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms. And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains Look to my little babes, my dear remains. And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me, These O protect from step-dame's injury . . . "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet" shows the tension Bradstreet often felt between her love for life and her Christian beliefs: . . . More fool then I to look on that was lent As if mine own, when thus impermanent. Farewell dear child, thou ne'er shall come to me, But yet a while, and I shall go to thee; Mean time my throbbing heart's cheered up with this: Thou with thy Saviour art in endless bliss. Bradstreet's theological beliefs are further documented in the Andover Collection (the last section of the current edition) and contains various poems and prose, the first of which, "To My Dear Children," documents Bradstreet's spiritual odyssey meant to be read after she had died: "The method I will observe shall be this: I will begin with God's dealing with me from my childhood to this day." "The Words of Anne Bradstreet" places all of Bradstreet's writings clearly within her biographical framework and as such is the definitive tool for understanding this important colonial

poet.

Anne Bradstreet originally intended to share her verses only with her family and close friends. Without her prior permission, her brother-in-law John Woodbridge took them to England and published them in 1650 under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up In America*. Apparently, Mrs. Bradstreet anticipated the skepticism with which her poetry might be received. In her Prologue (above), she apologizes for her lowly attempts and begs the reader to forgive her for her simple verses. While she admits her poems cannot compare with those of the Greeks or other great poets, she humbly asks to receive due credit for her efforts. I imagine Mrs. Bradstreet would be amazed to know that her humble expressions of devotion for her family and her God are still read and admired today, since she didn't initially intend to publish them at all.

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) was America's first female poet and is considered one of the two greatest New England poets of the 17th century. Written in the frontier wilderness setting of colonial America, her poetry shows a balance of Puritan thought and feminine feeling. In spite of challenges of raising eight children, suffering economic hardship, fighting recurring illness, and having a frequently absent husband, Bradstreet managed to find time and energy to produce a collection of poems that have endured over three centuries. Leaving the comforts and conveniences of England to begin a new life in a barren land must have been quite an adjustment for the young, newly married gentlewoman. Born in 1612 and married at age sixteen, Bradstreet came from a well-educated English family. Her father, Thomas Dudley, received a Cambridge education and served as steward to the Earl of Lincoln, while her husband, Simon, the son of a Puritan minister and a Cambridge man, involved himself in political and business pursuits. In 1630, Anne traveled from England with her parents and husband on the *Arbella*, which brought the second group of colonists to Massachusetts (ten years after the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth). Dudley replaced John Winthrop as the second governor of Massachusetts in 1634, and later Simon Bradstreet also served as governor in 1679 (after Anne's death in 1672).

Although a member of a prominent family, Anne Bradstreet primarily focused on caring and providing for the needs of her ever-growing family, while her husband's political business often required him to travel from home. Bradstreet's poetry draws on her knowledge of the Bible, history, and mythology, to which she often refers and alludes. Adrienne Rich remarks that, as a Puritan, the Bible "was the air she ... breathed." Many of her poems are versified prayers, epitaphs, and meditations. For example, she wrote elegies and epitaphs for several grandchildren, a sister-in-law, and both her parents, as well as one each in honor of Queen Elizabeth and poet Sir Philip Sidney. We can only imagine how Anne felt when she heard that her brother-in-law was circulating

her poems throughout England. She didn't think they were very good, certainly not worthy of being shared with strangers or published for profit. In "The Author to her Book," she talks of her initial embarrassment upon learning that her works had been "exposed to public view" and speaking of her book as if it were her child writes, I cast thee by as one unfit for light, Thy visage was so irksome in my sight; Yet being mine own, at length affection would Thy blemishes amend, if so I could. (10-13) So Bradstreet edited, corrected, and added to the original collection for a second edition, which appeared in 1678. Unfortunately, many of her completed manuscripts and works-in-progress, along with the Bradstreet's library of 800 books, were destroyed in a fire in 1666. But we can be grateful to the brother who saw value in her work and wanted the world to be able to profit from them. While her earlier poems are largely impersonal in nature, Bradstreet's later poetry expresses more of her experiences and feelings. She addresses subjects close to her heart: her relationship with her husband, her children, and her God. The rather intimate letters written to her absent husband depict a woman deeply devoted to her spouse and anxiously awaiting his return. In one poem he is the Sun, whose warmth she misses; in another she is a "loving hind that (hartless) wants her deer." In a letter written in prose to her children, she tells of her childhood faith, the illnesses during which she turned to God, her conviction of sin, and her reasons for believing in the existence of God and specifically the Puritan doctrines. In her desire to leave something of value for her posterity, her "Meditations Divine and Moral," dated 1664, offer a collection of proverbs and observations on life written for her son Simon. Several of her verses reflect on the solemn topics of affliction, sickness, and death. Her frequent bouts of fits, fevers, and fainting inspired her to reflect on the brevity of life and her hope of eternity with God. Through these short pieces of verse and prose, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the Puritan mind-set. Everything, whether positive or negative, was believed to be from the hand of God. God uses adversity and sorrow as means of correction and for the good of his children. Yet, the God who brings pain and affliction is the same merciful God who provides relief and comfort. After one episode of illness, Bradstreet wrote, "[T]his condition that I am in is the best for me, for God doth not afflict willingly, nor take delight in grieving the children of men...but He doth it for my advantage, and that I may be a gainer by it." "As Weary Pilgrim" expresses the common Puritan idea of being a wanderer in a foreign land, waiting for God to take him to his eternal home of rest. She writes, A pilgrim I, on earth perplexed With sins, with cares and sorrow vext[...] Oh, how I long to be at rest And soar on high among the blest. (19-20, 23-24) To the Puritan, all earthly suffering is temporary, and death is a welcome event. Other poems, such as "Upon the Burning of our House" and "Before the Birth of One of her Children," convey an attachment to the beloved people and even things she would grieve to lose.

This last one is especially moving and reminds us how common it was for women to die in childbirth. Here she is, about to give birth, and she's saying her goodbye to her husband, expressing her wishes that he remember her kindly and protect her children from the harm of a future stepmother. As "the mother of American poetry," Anne Bradstreet has survived the harsh criticism of 18th and 19th century literary scholars who labeled her works "quaint and curious" and critics who have pronounced her works "technically amateurish." But Anne wrote in a letter to her children that she did not write her poetry for the purpose of displaying her skill, but to testify of God's providential works and truths, "not to set forth myself, but the glory of God." Her writings give us insight into the mind of the Puritan in general and particularly into the heart of a loving Puritan wife and mother. Her poetry, characterized by humility, honesty, and wit, primarily directs the readers' thoughts toward God - His goodness, provision, loving protection, and even testing and correction. Regardless of their personal beliefs, contemporary readers of Bradstreet will still find her works inspiring, poignant, and enlightening.

Anne Dudley Bradstreet was considered a great poetess, especially for the period in which she lived. She was a true Brit who became a colonist. I was appalled at the ludicrous innuendos regarding Anne Bradstreet's "feminist" bent. If Anne Dudley Bradstreet were alive today, she would heartily disagree with the feminist movement with all her might. It is sad to see great writers from eras passed politicized for a 20th century agenda. In my opinion, it is even sadder to see this woman's work bastardized and dissected into a modern day litany for the feminist movement. Revisionists destroy much of our history by their convoluted interpretations. A destructive practice, to say the least, by modern day writers. Anne Dudley Bradstreet was a wife and mother first, last and foremost. However, because she was an educated woman for her time, she chose poetry as an artistic outlet as opposed to more traditional pastimes, ie: needlepoint or quilting and gossiping. Her poems do not bear the marks of early "feminism", but that of a Colonial woman who bore her heart, soul and mind in words. Words of a devoted wife, mother and colonist enduring untold hardships with unwavering stamina which is virtually unknown to day by ANY feminist. If one truly wishes to know Anne Dudley Bradstreet, they will not do so reading "The Works of Anne Bradstreet" revised by Rich and Hensley. Modern day writers/feminists cannot reinvent a person's soul or heart which appears to be the goal of this book. Personally, I take great umbrage with this book.

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