

Chapter & Verse

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The Finest Bread: Anne Bradstreet (1612 - 1672)



Anne Bradstreet endured a perilous three month sea crossing, through sickness and storms, from England to the *New World* of America; she adapted to the most primitive living conditions and to harsh Puritan doctrines; she lived amidst hunger, violence and disease with the constant fear of being attacked, tortured and killed by tribes of Red Indians who quite naturally felt that they were being robbed of their traditional lands; she went on to give birth to eight children and became the first notable female poet of America.

Disembarking from the sailing ship, the *Arabella* at the age of just 18, she found to her horror that she had left her world of comfort and privilege far behind. Her father managed the extensive estate of the Earl of Lincoln and Anne spent her childhood in relative wealth and luxury. Like almost all females of her time, she did not attend any sort of school but she had the freedom to explore the Earl's well-stocked library and she gained a considerable knowledge of Greek and Latin as well as early English Literature and Philosophy.

Also like many females of her age, she married young, at the age of sixteen. Her husband, Simon Bradstreet assisted her father in the management of the estate. Just

two years after her marriage, she had little choice but to follow her husband and both sets of parents who made the decision to emigrate in order to set up a world entirely governed by Puritan values i.e. the simplification of doctrine and worship, a greater strictness in religious discipline and to purify the Church of England from Roman Catholic practices.

In a letter to the Countess of Lincoln, Anne's father described life in the New England colony where they first resided:

We found the Colony in a sad and unexpected condition, above eighty of them being dead the winter before; and many of those alive weak and sick; all the corn and bread amongst them all hardly sufficient to feed them a fortnight.

Anne and her family moved house a number of times in search of a less Spartan existence but conditions improved only very slowly. One of the places in which they lived was Salem, Massachusetts where at the end of the 17th century, the notorious witch trials took place and twenty people, fourteen of them women, were hanged for the alleged practice of witchcraft. The Puritans were closely involved in this terrible event. In the ferocious New England winters, Anne's and her husband's family huddled together in the one small room with a fire in order not to freeze to death. This was the world in which Anne gave birth to eight children, each pregnancy running the significant risk of her own death or the death of the baby. Despite the unending domestic demands made of her, Anne somehow found the time and

solitude vital for the composition of poetry.

Despite the dangers and privations of life in 17th century New England, she had a great love of the beauty of the natural world and the pleasures of marriage and children. This sensuous appreciation of life conflicted with Puritan beliefs that spiritual aspirations should transcend all earthly pleasures and that fundamental questions of existence should involve sin and the struggle for redemption in order to gain eternal life in Heaven. Anne experienced glimpses of Paradise in this world and felt that it was a waste to turn one's back on such moments. What she desired of the much discussed afterlife was not a transcendence of earthly delights but a continuation. In her own words she asked: *for were earthly comforts permanent, who would look for heavenly?* One of the most impressive poems included in a later edition of *The Tenth Muse* is entitled *Contemplation* which is a skilfully rhymed poem about the extraordinary beauty she glimpsed in those rare moments when she could escape the many household tasks she had to perform.



Then higher on the glistering Sun I gaz'd,
 Whose beams was shaded by the leafy Tree.
 The more I look'd, the more I grew amaz'd
 And softly said, what glory's like to thee?
 Soul of this world, this Universe's Eye,
 No wonder some made thee a Deity:
 Had I not better known (alas) the same had I.

* * *

Silent alone where none or saw, or heard,
 In pathless paths I lead my wand'ring feet.
 My humble Eyes to lofty Skies I rear'd
 To sing some Song my mazed Muse thought meet.
 My great Creator I would magnifie,
 That nature had thus decked liberally:
 But Ah and Ah again, my imbecility!

I heard the merry grasshopper then sing,
 The black clad Cricket bear a second part.
 They kept one tune and played on the same string,
 Seeming to glory in their little Art.
 Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise?
 And in their kind resound their maker's praise:
 Whilst I, as mute, can warble forth no higher layes.

Like many women, in particular, who had to adapt to life in the colonies, she was plagued by ill-health. Given the lack of sanitation, diseases were rife. In a poem called *The Four Elements*, she lists a few of the ailments herself and her children suffered from:

What gripes of wind my
 infancy did pain,
 What tortures I in breeding
 teeth sustain?
 What crudities my stomach
 cold has bred
 Whence vomits, flux and
 worms have issued?

Her husband's duties often called him away home and she felt bereft without him. Some of her tenderest poems are written to her absent husband. With good reason, she had a great fear of dying in childbirth, as so many

women in her age did, and in this poem, she hopes that her husband will go on loving her even when she is dead and that he will care for the children left behind and protect them from a possibly cruel stepmother.

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 thy self, or
 love'st me
 These O protect from step
 Dames injury.

The voice of Anne Bradstreet has particular significance in the context of the 17th Century when women, especially Puritan

women, were so often marginalized and silenced. (A common method of punishing a women in the 17th Century was to place an iron muzzle over her head with a bridle bit which lay on top of her tongue making speech impossible.)



Anne believed that at one time, the partnership between men and women was much more equal as she expresses in a poem written in honour of Queen Elizabeth:

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.

A few years before she died in her sixtieth year, Anne wrote a series of aphorisms, one of which aptly describes her life: *The finest bread hath the least bran; the purest honey, the least wax; the sincerest Christian, the least self-love.*

