

The Colonial Poetry of Anne Bradstreet

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Of all of the technologies and skills the colonists brought with them in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, those related to agriculture and milling had the greatest resonance in literature and the arts. The reasons for this attraction are manifold and interrelated; first and foremost was the necessity of food, particularly bread, to maintain life, not only on a physical level, but also on a spiritual one. Biblical images of bread as the sustainer of spiritual life abound, most notably in the Jewish celebration of the Passover and the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, with bread and wine being food for the soul. The themes of tilling the soil, planting the seed, tending the crops and harvest were not only tied to the changing of seasons, but also to the ages of man and the transformation from earthly life to eternal life. From the late Middle Ages on, into Colonial times, the alchemical tradition of bringing things to perfection was also in play.

One of the earliest Colonial writers in whom these medieval thought patterns can be found was the Puritan poet, Anne Bradstreet [1612?-1672], who emigrated from England with the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a young bride of 18. She deserves students' attention because she was the first poet of either sex to write a considerable body of work in America; and because the poetry is good, displaying considerable insight and flashes of humor. Like other girls from good families in the 17th century, Anne was educated at home, beginning at an early age. Her father's position, steward to the fourth Earl of Lincoln, brought her in contact with noblemen and upper-class Englishmen, people of education and taste, well-versed in literature, music, and science. Anne, who would have been educated first by her mother, tells us that she could read at age 4. She would have learned French and Latin, and seems to have had a particularly good education in the scientific knowledge of the time, as evidenced in the poems we will consider.[\[1\]](#)

The interpenetration of the earthly world with the heavenly one and its symbolic significance, so essential to understanding medieval and early modern culture and its views on nature, is reflected in her poetry. For that reason alone, her perspective on the environment and the natural world is valuable for students of the 21st century. Medieval thought saw nature as a book that revealed its creator, God. The observation and study of nature brought one closer to God; all elements in nature had symbolic and transcendental meanings. As these ideas were slowly abandoned in the early modern period, nature became simply part of the material world and its transcendental relationship was largely forgotten. It has been argued that this change fostered attitudes that produced ecological disasters in the 19th and 20th centuries. Students today, unfamiliar with this world-view, will not only expand their knowledge of Colonial literature and Colonial attitudes, but will also learn about the first important American poet, who happened to be a woman.

The series of four poems, the Quaternions, in which we find references to grain—its sowing, growth, harvest, and importance, belong to her early work. Each of the four poems contains four subcategories, the four Elements, the four Humours, the four Ages and the four Seasons. The first two, on the elements and the humours, have their roots in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Medieval Europe adopted this system and added its own interpretations; the system, which influenced both natural science and medicine, remained in play in the American colonies until into the 18th century with the acceptance of Copernican theories about the position of the earth in the solar system. According to the older system, the earth was the center of the universe and was surrounded by water, then a globe of air, and beyond that, fire. Though the elements were distinct entities, they were present in varying degrees in all animate and inanimate matter of earth. The four humours are connected with the elements, which come into the body in food and are processed by the stomach, producing the fluids known as humors: Choler, Blood, Melancholy and Phlegm. Each dominates a particular organ: Choler, the heart, Blood the liver, Melancholy, the spleen and bones, and phlegm, the brain and nerves. [2] Medieval and early modern physicians analyzed both personality traits and physical appearances in deciding which humors dominated an individual. These analyses provided the basis for diagnosis and treatment.

Passages from the Poems

Four Ages of Man (ll.41-44)

And last of all to act upon this stage
Leaning upon his staff came up Old Age
Under his arm a sheaf of wheat he bore,
An harvest of the best, what needs he more?

Question to students

1. "Knowing what you do about the dual symbolism of wheat, why does Bradstreet ask what else Old Age needs if he carries a sheaf of wheat?"

Middle Age [referring to youth] (ll. 235-238)

When my wild oats were sown and ripe and mown
I then received an harvest of mine own.
My reason then bad judge how little hope
My empty seed should yield a better crop:

Question to students

1. "What kind of harvest is the poet talking about? [a bad one] What language does she use to give you clues [wild oats, little hope, empty seed] What does she think now of her adolescent judgment?"
2. Note: Puritan adolescents were expected to rebel and sow their wild oats, then turn to the adult tasks of marriage and child-rearing. Puritan pastors

believed that these youthful indiscretions could serve as a useful spur to bring the individual to a better understanding and appreciation of the teachings of Christianity. [3]

The Four Elements

Fire (II.41-48)

Ye Husband-men, your Coulters made by me
Your Hooes your Mattocks, & what e're you see
Subdue the Earth and fit it for your Grain
That so it might in time requite your pain;
Though strong limb'd Vulcan forg'd it by his skill
I made it flexibe unto his will;
Ye Cooks, your Kitchen implements I frame
Your Spits, Pots, Jacks, what else I need not name.

Earth

Crop failure [when the earth fails to provide] (II. 219-227):

Now must I [Earth] show mine adverse quality,
And how I oft work mans mortality:
He sometimes finds, maugre his toiling pain
Thistles and thorns where he expected grain.
My sap to plants and trees I must not grant,
The vine, the olive and the figtree want:
The Corn and Hay do fall before the're mown
And buds from fruitfull trees as soon as blown;
Then dearth prevails....

Question to students

1. What words does Bradstreet use to indicate famine? What could be a cause of Earth's not giving sap to trees, the collapse of grain [corn] and hay, and the dropping of buds? [drought] Why does Bradstreet mention crops not grown in New England? [olive, fig-tree]

Water (II. 355-362)

As I with showers oft times refresh the earth,
So oft in my excess I cause a dearth,
And with abundant wet so cool the ground,
By adding cold to cold no fruit proves sound.
The Farmer and the Grasier do complain
Of rotten sheep, lean kine, and mildew'd grain.

And with my wasting floods and roaring torrent,
The cattel, hay and corn I sweep down current.

Question to students

1. How does Water aid in the maintenance of an adequate food supply? What happens when there is too much water? What are rotten sheep? [rot is a disease of sheep caused by the liver fluke; a rotten sheep is one infected with rot] "Dearth" is used in both passages: what does it mean? What bad health effects can mildewed rye have? [ergot]

2. In both of these passages, the grain crops are mentioned. What do the passages tell us about preferred foods? Why is hay mentioned so often? [food for cows and sheep in the winter]

The Four Seasons

Spring (ll. 19-22)

Now goes the Plow-man to his merry toyle,
He might unloose his winter locked soyl:
The Seeds-man too, doth lavish out his grain,
In hope the more he casts, the more to gain.

Question to students

1. Look at the late medieval pictures of plowing and sowing. The same implement for plowing and the same method of sowing [broadcasting] were used in colonial America. Why would the sower be lavish with the seed? Who liked to eat it right away?

Summer (ll. 147-156)

With sickles now the bending Reapers goe
The russling tress of terra down to mowe;
And bundles up in sheaves, the weighty wheat,
Which after Manchet makes for Kings to eat:
The Barly, Rye and Pease should first had place,
Although their bread have no so white a face.
The Carter leads all home with whistling voice,
He plow'd with pain, but reaping doth rejoice;
His sweat, his toyle, his careful wakeful nights,
His fruitful Crop abundantly requites.

Question to students

1. This passage from *Summer*, for the month of August, has much in common with the Breughel painting. Find similar elements [cutting wheat, bundling in sheaves, conveying of harvest to the house]. What is Manchet and why do Kings eat it? Why does Anne Bradstreet talk about a king and which kind would she have had in mind? What kind of bread do the other three grains produce? Why should they have first place? Why would the Carter have sleepless nights because of his wheat? [hail, marauders, floods]

2. In an earlier passage, Age carries a sheaf of wheat under his arm and the poet says he could want no more. What parallels can you see between that passage and this one?

Notes

1. [\[back\]](#) Rosamond Rosenmeier, *Anne Bradstreet Revisited* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), pp. 14-25, 51-55; Ann Stanford, *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan. An Introduction to her Poetry* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), pp. i., 29-51.
2. [\[back\]](#) Stanford, [Bradstreet](#), 29-35.
3. [\[back\]](#) Rosenmeier, pp. 31-32.