

Humble Assertions: The True Story of Anne Bradstreet's Publication of *The Tenth Muse*



There are no extant portraits of Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the “first” American poet. But on the Web, when one Googles Bradstreet, a popular nineteenth-century painting pops up. An imaginary Bradstreet sits at a desk, wearing a white bonnet and a white apron, looking modest and soulful, exactly as the Victorians thought a Puritan woman should look. This image is replicated throughout the Web, appearing on the [Poetry Foundation](#) and Wikipedia pages for Anne Bradstreet, demonstrating modernity’s conception of Bradstreet as a pious pilgrim, unconcerned with worldly affairs.



A Victorian image of Anne Bradstreet. Frontispiece for *An Account of Anne Bradstreet: The Puritan Poetess, and Kindred Topics*, edited by Colonel Luther Caldwell (Boston, 1898). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

It is not that the Victorian artist was wrong. Bradstreet was indeed a devout Christian and her work reflects her life-long struggle with her faith. But she was far from being the humble bonnet-wearer that the Victorians wanted her to be. Bradstreet was deeply ambitious. She used the word "fame" thirteen times in her first three poems, reflecting her concern about her stature as a poet and her anxiety that as a woman she would not be allowed to take her place in the pantheon of great English poets. She wrote more than 7,000 lines of poetry, addressing topics that were considered far too complex for a mere woman, including the history of the world, the current state of the sciences, the political relationship between the old and new worlds, and the many religious conundrums of Puritanism.

How, then, did this Victorian image of Bradstreet come to dominate the airwaves? Perhaps the answer lies in the propaganda campaign that Bradstreet and her family launched after her book, *The Tenth Muse*, was published in England in 1650. According to Bradstreet, she was so averse to fame that she did not want her poetry published. In her poem, "The Author to her Book," she declares that the manuscript was "stol'n" from her. The thief was her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, a "friend more loving than true." When Woodbridge found a publisher for Bradstreet's work in England, he did this of his own accord, she implies, leading readers to believe that her book was published behind her back, without her knowledge. And so began the story that modern readers still believe today. Bradstreet's words are reinforced by the prefatory material Woodbridge included in *The Tenth Muse*. He claims that Bradstreet's poetry came second to her womanly duties. She went without sleep to write, he declares, and never scrimped on her chores. First and foremost, she was a wife and mother. The last thing she wanted was fame.

Unfortunately, readers have taken these claims at face value, overlooking Bradstreet's sophistication as a poet, her skills as a disguise artist, and her youthful ambition. But if one reads Bradstreet's poetry with close attention, one finds work that is replete with double meanings and ironies, self-deprecation and even self-condemnation—strategies she had learned in a culture that disparaged women for trespassing in realms that were considered male territory. This is not to say that Bradstreet's self-deprecation was insincere. It would have been difficult for Bradstreet, or, for that matter, any seventeenth-century woman, to free herself from the prejudices of the time. The experts taught that women were weak, vulnerable, and foolish—criticisms that were internalized by Bradstreet, who had witnessed first-hand what happened to outspoken women. In 1638, just twelve years before the publication of *The Tenth Muse*, Bradstreet's acquaintance Anne Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts Bay for holding meetings in which she criticized the colony's ministers and challenged male authorities.

As a result, Bradstreet had learned to couch her ambitions in terms that were acceptable to her time. In one early poem, the poet/narrator tries to scale Mount Olympus to beg help from the classical muses, but is driven off the mountain because she is a woman. However, instead of accepting her fate as a lesser poet, she declares that she is not cast down, as she will have a "better guide," the Christian God, a muse infinitely superior to the pagan gods of classical antiquity. In the prologue to her long poem *The Quarternions*, Bradstreet writes that male poets deserve laurel wreaths for their work whereas she, a woman poet, will be content with a simple wreath of thyme. But of course "thyme" is a homonym for "time," and so the careful reader can see that Bradstreet's apparent self-deprecation is actually a disguised proclamation of her ambition. Men's achievements, she declares, may win them worldly fame, but she, as a woman poet, aspires to more than this—*everlasting* acclaim, eternity itself.

This dependence on indirect assertions and strategic twists makes Bradstreet's work unusually complex—one of the reasons she is still read today. But her sophistication as a poet did not come easily. From the first, she was serious about her craft, studying the poets of previous generations to improve her skills. Her early poems are full of learned allusions and witty figures of speech. Over time, however, she changed her style to suit her deepening commitment to New World Puritanism, vowing to use "plain speech." Thus, although she lamented that *The Tenth Muse* was made of homespun cloth rather than expensive silk ("The Author to her Book"), she was intent on developing a New England Puritan aesthetic that she believed superior to Old World poetics. Not for her the elegance of Elizabethan versifiers. No more emulation of the past. Instead she would take her place as a New World woman poet, a pious Puritan who would use simple language to express her humble devotion to God. Again, although these pronouncements are intrinsically self-deprecatory, they are also statements of Christian ascendancy. For who goes to heaven first? The poor, the meek, the humble. Accordingly, Bradstreet's declarations of humility were also declarations of superiority, at least in the Christian sense.

Bradstreet had been taught to believe that when the end times came, she and other humble pilgrims would be raised above those who seemed more powerful during their time on earth. New England herself would be ascendant over Old England, because of New England's superior piety.

But despite Bradstreet's assertions of Christian ascendancy, it does not necessarily follow that she wanted her manuscript published, or that she had any advance knowledge of John Woodbridge's publication scheme. It is in her poetry, which has always offered rewards to the careful reader, that she reveals that she was fully aware of Woodbridge's endeavor. The clue lies in one of her least-read poems, "David's Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan." At first glance, this poem appears to be one of Bradstreet's least interesting works. A simple reprisal of 2 Samuel 1, the biblical passage where the future King David mourns the death of his predecessor, King Saul, and his son Jonathan, Bradstreet seems to offer the reader no new insights into this familiar biblical story. The only distinctive aspect of the poem is that she uses the language of her time; for instance, replacing "daughters of Israel" with "Israel's dames." But other than Bradstreet's deployment of seventeenth-century vernacular, the poem seems the most opaque and the least promising of all of her works. In fact, it seems downright dull, until one considers when it was written. And when it was published.



Title page of Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* (1650), the first book of New World poetry, published in England. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

As other scholars have pointed out, it seems clear that Bradstreet wrote "David's Lamentation" after hearing that Charles, the English king, had been executed by English Puritans. With this in mind, the poem instantly becomes far more than a simple translation of a biblical text. It becomes political verse, mourning the execution. However, Bradstreet disguised her point of view,

because to offer a direct critique of the English puritans was dangerous. She did not want them to direct their wrath toward their New World counterparts. Furthermore, the timing of the poem indicates that Bradstreet, or at least someone from the New World, sent the poem overseas after John Woodbridge, the one who had purportedly “stol’n” her manuscript, had sailed to England in 1648, a year before the king’s execution in 1649. Indeed, Woodbridge had been sent over to help Cromwell negotiate with Charles in order to avoid the violent death of the king. Why does this matter? “David’s Lamentation” is included in *The Tenth Muse*, which means that Bradstreet, or one of her family members, must have made sure that Woodbridge had the poem so that it could appear in her book.

Although it is possible that someone other than Bradstreet sent Woodbridge “David’s Lamentation,” it is highly unlikely that Bradstreet would have been uninvolved. Vellum was expensive. It was difficult to make multiple copies of poems. Time was of the essence if “David’s Lamentation” was to be included in *The Tenth Muse*. A messenger, a reputable captain and a ship all had to be found. Bradstreet’s cooperation would have to be secured if she and her family wanted “David’s Lamentation” in the manuscript.

The evidence of Bradstreet’s active involvement in the publication of *The Tenth Muse* clears up a centuries-old misconception, revealing her to be a far more complicated figure than the popular Victorian image of her suggests. Yes, she was a devoted Puritan. But she was also ambitious, not precisely in the modern sense, as she was not interested in promoting her work to earn celebrity, but as both a Puritan and a New English writer, she was convinced that her poetry could help spread what she believed was a truer version of Christianity to the English-speaking world.

Motivated as she was by her faith and her commitment to the Puritan mission, one might think that this revelation about Bradstreet’s active role in publishing *The Tenth Muse* would be entirely uncontroversial; Bradstreet was not a seventeenth-century firebrand, interested in starting a feminist revolution. And yet, the idea that Bradstreet participated in the publication of her book still meets with angry resistance from those who would like to keep Bradstreet in her “place” as a submissive wife and mother. When I amended Bradstreet’s Wikipedia page to include the evidence that Bradstreet was aware of the publication of *The Tenth Muse*, one angry “editor” disputed this point, stating, “Bradstreet was not responsible for her writing becoming public. Bradstreet’s brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, sent her work off to be published. Bradstreet was a righteous woman and her poetry was not meant to bring attention to herself.”

Clearly, the idea of an assertive/agentive Bradstreet has hit a nerve among readers who would like to view Puritan women as subordinated private figures, even though these roles are largely a Victorian invention. In the seventeenth century, Puritans did not separate their religious obligations from their civic duties. The Victorian separation between public and private spheres did not yet

exist. Instead, it was considered a theological and public obligation to raise children to be good Christians, and to adhere to one's faith. The publication of a book of poetry that espoused Bradstreet's commitment to Puritanism was certainly an unconventional act, but it could still be perceived as a fulfillment of Bradstreet's roles as a good wife and mother. Certainly, this was the stance adopted by Woodbridge and the other writers of the prefatory material of *The Tenth Muse*. As for Bradstreet herself, she was undoubtedly aware that she would face criticism for writing poetry, and yet she did not let this stop her—an important point that is missed by those who cling to the Victorian image of Bradstreet. Far from shrinking from the public eye, Bradstreet took the courageous step of publishing her ideas, and so deserves to be remembered not only as one of the bravest pilgrims in American history, but in the Christian tradition.

This article originally appeared in issue 16.3 (Summer, 2016).

Charlotte Gordon's latest book, the dual biography *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (2015), won the National Book Critics award. She has also published a biography of Anne Bradstreet, *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Story of America's First Poet* (2005).