Bradstreet’s Quest to Find Answers

When we look into early American Literature of the Puritan age, no character stands out more than that of Anne Bradstreet. There are many aspects which make her unique. Jane Donahue Eberwien points out in “The Unrefined Ore of Anne Bradstreet’s Quaternions” that Bradstreet holds great “historical significance as America’s first woman poet” (19). Also, her unique style of writing, the differences in voices and themes, and the time period in which she wrote make the study of her poetry one of the more popular topics to engage in. When we look into those specific elements, namely her style of voice and the questions she is presenting, we can see that she is on a personal quest to find answers of truth about life.

In her article “Anne Bradstreet: Poet in Search of Form” Rosemary M. Laughlin says of Bradstreet that “there is no picture . . . but the portrait painted by her own later poems: a cultured, educated Englishwoman adapting herself to a totally strange new environment, a loving wife, a devoted mother, a questing Puritan, and a sensitive poet” (1). Each of these points can be seen throughout her poetry. When we examine both her public and private poetry we can see a real woman, with real questions, and real concerns; and the best way for her to address and resolve these questions and concerns is through writing poetry. In “Anne Bradstreet: Dogmatist and Rebel” Ann Stanford explains that throughout Bradstreet’s life and her poetry there is a constant tension that she is continuously reviving and resolving (373). And this pattern of tensions and resolutions is what gives life to her poetry. It also sets a pattern for future American
writers; a pattern of questioning and finding answers seen in later Romantic writers such as Emerson and Whitman.

Avery Fischer’s article "Bradstreet's On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet and Before the Birth of One of Her Children" says that “Bradstreet . . . [is] an early feminist because of her willingness to produce poetry in a society that viewed women writers as dangerous (11). She was breaking new ground, and braving a new frontier of writing in a society that was “inhospitable to women writing” (Schweitzer 292). This is one of her ways in which she questions her situation and society in general; by breaking the social norm and writing when Puritan housewives who wrote were viewed as dangerous, or unrighteous. She never outright questions why women’s roles are what they are, but the fact that she is writing anything, and that it’s being published, is evidence that she is indeed asking, why can’t things change? Why can’t she write, and be just as good as a man? Ann Stanford supports this by saying “The very fact that she wrote, that she considered herself a poet, that she continued to write in spite of criticism, indicates that she was willing to act independently in spite of the dogmatic assertions of many of her contemporaries” (374).

Despite her pioneering in poetry and feminism, Bradstreet remained a loyal wife and mother. On closer examination one can see through her poetry that she was in fact, an exemplarily good Puritan. Yes, it was frowned upon in Puritan society for women to write as Bradstreet did. Look at Anne Hutchinson as an example. Because of Hutchinson’s writing and questioning, she was banished and ended up suffering more than the normal colonist until her death. However, Bradstreet was a little more conservative in her writing; still questioning, but cleverly presented it in such a way that she was able to maintain her lifestyle. Kenneth Requa in “Anne Bradstreet’s Poetic Voices” explains that one of the major reasons why she was able to
safely write was because of her brother-in-law. When he had taken her poetry and published in without her knowing he included in the introduction that she was a good woman, “properly humble,” and “wrote poetry only in her legitimately idle hours” (3). This is most likely what ended up saving Bradstreet the humiliation that was given to Hutchinson.

As stated earlier, the nature of Bradstreet’s poetry seems to be that of questioning. Much can be gained from looking at the questions she presents. But also, we can learn much about Bradstreet by looking at the different voices she uses for both her public and private poetry. Critics may say that she was rebellious and a feminist, but through her history we can see that she was a simple, ordinary woman, who was able to achieve the extraordinary by writing poetry.

Many critics would look at Bradstreet’s poetry and find questions that are bravely being asked against society. To them, her asking questions is looked on as a form of rebellion, and an early promotion of feminism. Again, she lived in a time dominated by Puritan theology when women who were writing were looked down upon, and even thought dangerous. “Bradstreet . . . possesses a keen ability to reason, but she lives in a world whose design she mustn’t criticize” (Fischer 12). But she does criticize and question. It is often very subtle, however, sometimes she is very blunt as is seen in the Prologue, “I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits, / A poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong, / For such despite they cast on female wits” (25-28). This is an example of what Ann Stanford explains in “Anne Bradstreet: Dogmatist and Rebel” as Bradstreet’s “quiet rebellion . . . in her defense of the capability of women to reason” (378). Through her poetry, Bradstreet was able to take a stand on what many today would consider injustices. In Stanford’s, and many other critics’ eyes, she was able to cleverly attack a male dominated society and question the very foundations on which that society was built upon. By so doing, “she had found an alternative to the flat mechanics of
debate and learned to manipulate arguments with whimsical dexterity. She could present the objections against her in such a way as to make opponents seem not only malicious but also unimaginative. . . . And she could even confess defeat in playfully ironic terms” (Eberwein 21)

However, to say that she is rebelling and trying to effect changes in her life, or in the future of women, would seem to categorize her as an extremist. When we look closer to her writing, especially her private poetry which was intended to be seen only by her family, we can see that “her pious poems often betrayed more struggle” (Fischer 11) of understanding life and the world. Rosemary Laughlin explains in best in “Anne Bradstreet: Poet in Search of Form” about Bradstreet’s questioning: “Her poignant appreciation of the brevity and beauty of all things mortal, her strong Christian faith and resignation to the will of God, and her concerns as a wife and mother. . . . It can be observed that Mistress Bradstreet was constantly questing for unity, unity in matter and spirit” (15). This “questing for unity” that Laughlin is talking about is shown through Bradstreet’s asking *questions* about life, the world, and her belief in God.

One may need to consider what it would have been like to live the lifestyle that Anne Bradstreet had to live; a new world, unknown and dangerous; a strict and demanding religion; and a life filled with hardship and death of her closest friends and family. It would only be natural for anyone to have doubts, fears, and confusion. Therefore, we can see that Bradstreet’s questioning is not of the injustices of her society, but a means to help her understand the purpose of life. However, this is again viewed as dangerous within a Puritan, Calvinistic society. One simply does not question Providence. It is only natural then to see why Bradstreet’s first, and “major question . . . seems to be this: How does one understand a God with whom questions are unwelcome, and with whom reasoning is fruitless?” (Fischer 13). It is clear that “Bradstreet . . . possesses . . . a need to criticize Providence” (Fischer 13).
To Bradstreet, the things of Providence are hard for her to see. She is willing to exercise faith and believe and trust in them, but only with great difficulty (Stanford 382). She asks why the doctrine is taught the way it is. This can clearly be seen within her poetry to her husband. In her poems she references that she and her husband will live together after death. Puritan doctrine taught that marriage was only to last while on Earth and once a spouse dies the marriage is terminated. By writing such poetry “She is . . . questioning the Puritan belief that marriage dissolves at death” (Fischer 13).

Another example can be seen in “Before the Birth of One of Her Children”. Bradstreet recognizes the possibility that she might die while delivering her child. If such an outcome were to happen, she admonishes her husband to remember her when looks upon them:

Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thy self, or loved’st me,
These O protect from step-dame’s injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honor my absent hearse;
And kiss the paper for thy love’s dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take (Lines 22-28).

She is claiming to live on through her children; an idea of immortality that was not taught in Puritan congregations. Bradstreet’s request to continue to remember her after death was also frowned upon since the idea of loving anything, or anyone, even family members who have passed on, was looked on as loving things of the world more than the things of God (Stanford 380).
Kenneth Requa notes in “Anne Bradstreet’s Poetic Voices” that this process of questioning that Bradstreet shows in her poetry is not an attempt to rebel against God, or to try to reform her society, but simply a personal quest to find answers. “She presents no more than a private statement of personal problems and personal solutions.” (4-5). Life was more difficult than easy for Bradstreet. She lost children and many more grandchildren to the harsh environment of the new world. Later on she would lose everything when her house burned down. Ann Stanford reminds us that although her beliefs are rooted firmly in “God and whatever God does is just . . . the loss is not fully compensated for by the hope of treasure that lies above” (385).

In order to better understand her questioning and her search for answers, we can look to her different voices. Critics will agree that there are two distinct voices that Bradstreet uses when writing her poetry: a public voice, and a private voice. The voices not only reveal her search for answers, but first and foremost, they reveal a lot about who Bradstreet is and the amount of education she was able to receive because of her family situation. In England, her father was a person of high rank which allowed her to have access to the Earl of Lincoln’s library. Her poetry is evidence of her knowledge and her education. This education and access to literary works is probably what helped create a creatively poetic mind and “add intellectual vigor even to expressions of wifely affection” (Eberwein 20). Eberwein also tells us that Bradstreet was able to “show off her wealth of information” in her “Quaternions” (19). Eberwein also says that these poems were simply “apprentice” poems; which, since they were successful, “established Anne Bradstreet’s poetic reputation and encouraged her to continue writing” (19). Being thus encouraged, Bradstreet excelled in her writing which only improved more and more over time. As her writing evolved we can quickly see the differences in the
voices which she uses since her poetry. In Kenneth Requa’s “Anne Bradstreet’s Poetic Voices” he says that “the public voice is imitative, the private voice original” (4).

Critics like Kenneth Requa claim that Bradstreet is an “insecure poet who criticizes her own work” (9). This is based off of the “interpretation of Bradstreet's public apologies . . . on the Romantic idea that the poet must mean what she says” (Margerum 152). This certainly seems to be true since she is constantly giving apologies in her public voice and praising male poets as the better writers. However, Eileen Margerum explains that Bradstreet is not showing insecurity or weakness, but following a traditional, Latin-based, renaissance style of writing that shows humility and gives credit to one’s predecessor, even if they are better than them (153). “By the time Bradstreet used these descriptions they were a thousand years old, having come into full flower with the Latin poets of the sixth century” (155).

As an example, “The dedication to her father, Thomas Dudley, has been interpreted literally as Bradstreet's declaration that her father is a better poet than she” (153). She does this because she is following the pattern and gives the honor and glory to where society deems it appropriate—to her father, the “worthy patron and senior poet” (153). Margerum explains that this is not weakness, but a sign of humility. She backs this argument with the striking statement, “That her father was manifestly not the better poet is shown by the family's choosing to publish Anne's works” (156).

Never once does Bradstreet apologize though for writing, and being a female writer. “More striking by its absence is the one form of poetic apology Bradstreet never uses. Although it was common practice among English women poets, she never uses her sex as an excuse for writing poor poetry” (Margerum 157). Whenever she does apologize, it is only for the incorrections and imperfections of the poem itself and not of the creator (Margerum 158);
Richard 8

Throughout all of her writings, “her tone is strong and uncompromising, asserting her right to speak as a poet without the need to hide behind poetic formulations” (Margerum 157).

Most of the poems which the reader enjoys today are those poems in which Bradstreet uses her private voice. These are the poems that are free to say whatever Bradstreet wishes to say. She doesn’t have to worry about mimicking or modeling other writers; in fact, with her private poems, “no other poet provides a proper model for her” (Requa 4-5). Requa also explains that in Bradstreet’s private poetry she is commenting on everyday issues that a housewife experiences regularly. Because of the intimacy of the experiences she has this “allows her to be a better poet, and throughout the private poetry she speaks with greater control than she did as a public poet” (11).

With Bradstreet’s private voice we can better see her trying to answer the questions she has about life. We can also see her answering the questions as well. In “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet” she approaches the death with hope, believing that Elizabeth is now “settled in an everlasting state” (line 7). Her peace with the passing of her grandchild shows her firm faith and belief in God and his plan and justice. Her approach is not as peaceful when another grandchild dies four years later. “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet” shows more unsteadiness and confusion, more pain, more suffering; but she still holds strong to her beliefs when she comforts herself by saying, “my throbbing heart’s cheered up with this: / Thou with thy Saviour art in endless bliss” (lines17-18). Thus we can see that with regards to her personal, private poetry, “Anne Bradstreet’s difficulties are not the subject; rather, for her intimate audience, she writes of her personal or family concerns and emphasizes private lessons” (Requa 10).
Having looked at the different voices that Bradstreet uses, readers can better understand her quest to find answers in her life. With her public voice she humbly shows “that masculine pretensions to intellectual superiority are fundamentally unnecessary, as the two sexes complement each other” (Eberwein 22). In her private voice she “cautions the reader against believing that God is unjust and unmerciful” (Fischer 12). However, the greatest of all the answers and conclusions that she comes to is her relationship with God.

Frequently in her poetry, the events which are written about are prompted by tragic events, or the possible tragedies the future holds. However, in all of these poems, she maintains a certain optimism. Jane Eberwein explains that this optimism in spite of trials is welcomed by Bradstreet because “human optimism suffers rebuke here rather than divine justice” (22-23) in the afterlife. This optimism is what gives Bradstreet the ability to see the hand of God work in her life on a daily basis. And we can see it in her poetry as well. Rosemary Laughlin explains in “Anne Bradstreet: Poet in Search of Form” that this optimism builds a trust with God, and that “it is precisely her trust in an everlasting union with God that enables her to bear whatever has happened. . . . Ultimate union with God and resignation to His will are desirable because He is a God of Love; her God is not [a] God of Doom” (16).

Anne Hildebrand says that Bradstreet “sees heaven in earthly metaphors” (117). An example of this use of metaphors can be found again in her poem “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet”. In the second stanza Bradstreet talks about trees rotting from the effects of time and old age, and how its seeds are replanted and start the cycle of life all over again. To her, this is evidence that God lives and is in control; “Is by His hand alone that guides nature and fate” (Line 14). Anne Bradstreet makes full use of her metaphors in order to celebrate her faith. The shadows as well as the lights of this world indicate the presence of God. The contrast as well
as the similarity of earth to heaven advances the purpose of religious discovery” (Hildebrand 118).

Robert Richardson in “The Puritan Poetry of Anne Bradstreet” takes the optimism and use of metaphors which have been discussed even further. He explains that when Bradstreet would look around she would see beauty in nature. This was different from most Puritan believers who believed that since there were no Christians in the New World, it was a land that was wild, savage, and dominion of the devil. But whenever Bradstreet looked at the natural world she saw a beautiful creation of God (326). This causes her to think deeper and not only see the beautiful natural world around her, but through the natural world, she can glimpse into heaven, and “it is the connection between the two that fascinates her and that gives direction to the poem” (325).

This connection between nature and heaven, again, helps her to find answers. “Anne Bradstreet reaches a state of mind which can apprehend both this world and the other, can resolve their apparently conflicting claims, and can find satisfaction in the accommodation or resolution” (322). This allows her to move forward in life despite the challenges that come. She is able to recognize the reality of trials that she has experienced and that she will experience in the future. Suffering is a natural thing among Puritan beliefs. However, to Bradstreet, this suffering is not evidence of God’s wrath and indignation towards them as sinners, but “proof of His personal concern for her salvation. Adversity, like the shortcomings of the world . . . dr[aw] man closer to God” (Hildebrand 118).

Many Puritans who might have experienced the same trials as Bradstreet would have concluded that it is just punishment and signs of damnation. Couple that with Bradstreet’s writing and questioning, and it would be rather simple for one to conclude that Bradstreet was
not destined to be saved. However, her doubts expressed in her poetry do not make her a candidate for damnation. Richardson best explains the reasoning behind Bradstreet’s ideology within her poetry:

That she had severe doubts about her faith does not make her any the less a Puritan. In fact . . . a firm and doubt-free conviction of salvation was a probable sign of damnation. . . . Doubt and struggle were built into the fabric of Puritanism. . . . Thus it becomes possible, I think, to regard Anne Bradstreet's struggles between love of this world and reliance on the next, and the poetic expression of those struggles, not as the rebelliousness of an anti-Puritan temperament but as an attempt to achieve the Puritan ideal of living in the world without being of it (Richardson 318).

In conclusion, we can see that Bradstreet was blessed throughout her life with an education, and a rare gift of writing which she successfully utilized against all odds. Her poetry is a great literary achievement, but was that her intention? Or is her poetry simply the product of her lifelong quest to find answers? Although it may seem at one time she is fine the next she questioning everything, “Anne Bradstreet was always willing to submit to the inevitable during her long pilgrimage, but she did it only after using the full faculties of the soul—the imagination, the affections, and the will—and it is this clash of feeling and dogma that keeps her poetry alive” (Stanford, 388). Throughout all of her trials and hardships, within her poetry—both public and private voices—we can see the journey she took to gain an understanding of God and nature, which solidified her faith, and made her to woman we praise today.
Works Cited


