

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672)

To my Dear Children and In reference to her Children

Anne Bradstreet arrived in Massachusetts with her parents and husband in 1630, alarmed to find, as she says below, “a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it.” She had enjoyed a privileged life and good education. Her father, Thomas Dudley, had been steward to the Earl of Lincoln, and he became deputy governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Her husband Simon later was governor.

Wealth and education did not fully protect her from the hazards of pioneer life: in particular, a harsh climate, illness, the birth of eight children, and the loss of a house in a fire. Out of these experiences she drew occasions for some of her family, without her knowledge or consent, in 1650. The Tenth Muse, as this collection was entitled, vividly evokes the feelings of a Puritan woman, especially the satisfactions she got from her children and family life, yet, in its ironies and exaggerated humility, it often protests against the restrictions of the woman’s role.

These two autobiographical letters to her children are not ironic in this way, but they do reveal her gentle mixtures of play and seriousness and her strict adherence to the Puritan world view. Every event, and especially every affliction, must be examined for its divine message. Sickness is an occasion for reviewing one’s spiritual life and can become a blessing. Thus, despite misery and dependence, the individual life is also exalted. It is the site of cosmic contest between good and evil. God makes himself manifest to each and every soul.

These two pieces allow for interesting comparison and contrast: both are addressed to her children, but in different forms and different moods. Further, one can ask whether the primary audience is really the children or herself.

The best reader’s edition of Bradstreet, which has an excellent foreword by Adrienne Rich, is *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967). “To my Dear Children” was written in 1656. The actual date for “In reference to her Children...” is not 1656, as stated in its title, but 1659.

To my Dear Children

This Book by Any yet unread, I leave for you when I am dead,

That, being gone, here you may find What was your living mother’s mind.

Make use of what I leave in Love And God shall blesse you from above.

Reading

Poems

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/bradstreet/bradstreet.html>