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Seeping Through the Divide: The American Experience in Bradstreet's Verse


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In the past, criticism of Anne Bradstreet's poetry has attempted to uncover the *real* Anne Bradstreet, and to determine if her work revealed underlying traces of proto-feminism. Although a feminist approach to Bradstreet's work seems almost unavoidable, critics must begin re-examining her work through a transatlantic lens rather than a feminist one. Reading Bradstreet's poems in *The Tenth Muse* through a transatlantic lens can illustrate how her early poems, which are commonly recognized as "masculine" and "British" in structure, actually show influences of the colonial experiences she was witnessing at first hand, thus creating the first "American inspired" poetic content.

Bradstreet's later verse, otherwise considered her domestic poetry, is often viewed by critics as more "feminine" and less formally structured, thus leading to the belief that in these she was influenced primarily by her personal experiences in Massachusetts. However, a close reading of several of the early poems including "The Four Elements" and "A Dialogue between Old England New; Concerning Their Present Troubles, Anno, 1642," provides evidence that the American experience was beginning to break through the British themes even at this early stage of her writing. Phrases like "Thistles and thorns where he expected grain/My sap to plants and trees I must not grant" from "The Four Elements" reflect the harsh landscape and the difficulties she and others had establishing a substantial living upon landing in the colony. The American content in Bradstreet's early poetry adds the type of personal experience that critics claim is only evident in her domestic poems, and provides a counterbalance to the assumptions that she is only imitating the "masculine" verse of literary men she read while still in Britain. Bradstreet's early writing thus demonstrates a "seeping" through of the "American experience" into her verse that is strictly designated as British in orientation.

## Seeping Through the Divide: The American Experience in Bradstreet's Verse

Kaitlin Tonti

America's first poet, Anne Bradstreet, began receiving significant attention when her poetry was first included in *American Poetry, 1671-1928*, an anthology published by Conrad Aiken in 1929. Since then she has been included in multiple American literature anthologies and is a staple in teaching and further understanding the essence of early American poetry. Bradstreet has also become popular among critics, who continue to investigate how she succeeded in being recognized as a successful female poet in colonial America without facing the negative repercussions and consequences faced by other popular women who rebelled against society, like Anne Hutchinson. Attention is commonly paid to the feminist aspects of her poetry and how it worked as a mechanism for feminine advancement in the larger context of Puritan culture. These subsections of Bradstreet research deserve time and should not be discounted as they are significant to constructing an entire portrait of Bradstreet, her time, and her poetry. However, it is significant to recall that she is primarily known as *America's* first poet, rather than simply a female poet. This paper does not intend to dismiss the feminist infrastructure upon which most Bradstreet criticism has been constructed, but rather to emphasize the American themes and subjects in her poetry that first make her an American poet and second an American poet who happens to be a woman.

Many are content with the notion that Bradstreet's four quaternions in *The Tenth Muse* are primarily inspired by the male, British poets she grew up reading, and therefore no elements of the American experience, or the female experience for that matter, exist prior to the creation of her later, domestic poetry. However, a closer examination of Bradstreet's work shows that the

poetry in *The Tenth Muse* emphasizes language and content that are consistent with and inspired by the New England experience of an ordinary woman. Using a Cis-Atlantic approach, a transatlantic approach that specifically focuses on the study between a “local particularity and a wider web of connections” (Armitage 23), Anne Bradstreet’s poetry should be viewed as an essential stepping stone in the development of an early American literary tradition. It is more than an offshoot of British verse that gives her permission to eventually explore her radical inner feminism. Bradstreet’s early work is actually representative of a blossoming early American subject matter that is significantly different from poetic influences of the British tradition.

In 1966 and again, and almost ten years later, in 1977, two critical articles were published that addressed Bradstreet from different vantage points. Ann Stanford based most of her argument on the Bradstreet poetry that was added to the second edition of *The Tenth Muse*, often referred to as her “domestic poetry.” Stanford determined that Bradstreet used her later poetry to press against the limitations of Puritan society and she should be remembered as a “rebellious and independent” woman. Although Stanford posited that Bradstreet’s rebellion was silent, it was still being fought in poetry like her elegy to Queen Elizabeth. For Stanford, Bradstreet’s conflicting emotions between spirituality and earthly materialism are what made her contribution to early American poetry rebellious (389). In 1977, Robert Arner analyzed what he considered the first division of *The Tenth Muse*, which includes the “Quaternions.” He also acknowledged Bradstreet’s inclusion of progressive language as an “overt resistance to the doctrine of male supremacy” (60). However, he also noted that *The Tenth Muse* is an overall progressive text from beginning to finish. Bradstreet transitions from “The Prologue” in the first division, when she doubts her own poetic abilities as compared to the supremacy of her contemporary male poets. But by the third section, she has moved to attack male domination in sovereign authority.

As Bradstreet criticism has continued to grow, it has taken shape in the form of Stanford's approach, focusing on very feminist and gender-driven analyses of Bradstreet's later, "domestic" work. For instance, Paula Kopacz discusses the unique liminal space in which Bradstreet functions; she is at once submissive to patriarchal politics and yet her aesthetics remain on the feminist spectrum. Jean Marie Lutes focuses on the female body and gynecology in Bradstreet's writing, and Joy A. J. Howard puts Bradstreet in company with the likes of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz to demonstrate how they were both "tenth muses" in their own rights. Recently, Abram Van Engen has looked at how Bradstreet's poetry forces the domestic sphere into the public and political realms. Only in biographies of Bradstreet, such as Elizabeth Wade White's *Tenth Muse* and Charlotte Gordon's *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet*, has attention been refocused on her *Tenth Muse*. Bradstreet's earliest work is ignored for several reasons, the most common being that the poems are "mediocre of their rhymes and [contain] couplets in isolation" (Arner 47).

Before moving to an analysis of Bradstreet's work, it is important to note that she was not alone in writing about the frustrations, but eventual acceptance of the New England lifestyle. The genre was building with Edward Johnson, who airs his annoyances with the colony in bold and direct language, and Roger Williams, whose acceptance of the landscape is represented through his acknowledgement of Amerindian culture. Johnson, who was the founder of Woburn, Massachusetts, wrote "New England Annoyances" in 16 four-line stanzas, that when read together address the climate and environmental distresses New Englanders often encountered, especially in those first months after landing: "New England's annoyances you that would know them, /Pray ponder these verses which briefly doth show them. /The place where we live is a wilderness wood, /Where grass is much wanting that's fruitful and good" (17). Similar to

Bradstreet's "The Four Elements," there is an emphasis on the wilderness as the primary distress. The lines in stanza 10 that read "We have pumpkin at morning and pumpkin at noon; /If it was not for pumpkins we should be undone" (18), also reflect the lack of variety Puritans had when it came to eating, something that, according to Johnson, affected them greatly since they were used to "pottage and puddings and custards and pies" in England.

In 1643, only a few years before the original edition of *The Tenth Muse* was published, Roger Williams wrote *A Key into the Language of America*- a book depicting the culture of the Amerindian, specifically focusing on their language. In a poem from that text, he writes:

Course bread and water's most their fare,  
O England's diet fine;  
Thy cup runs ore with plenteous store  
Of wholesome beare and win...Gods providence is rich to his,  
Let none distrustfull be;  
In wildernesse, in great distresse,  
These Ravens have fed me. (30)

Clearly, Williams is portraying a fairly positive outlook on the New England environment in this passage, especially in consideration of the food that he, and others like him, are eating. He even makes a subtle sarcastic reference to England's diet in comparison to that of the Amerindian's, stating that it is "fine," but his dependence has been on those "ravens" who occupy the wilderness. William's continues by openly chastising his homeland, stating that the English should not be so proud, for God made all men equal brothers (31). His poem problematizes the general opinion of most Puritans on the topic of Amerindians and the wilderness in general; however, it does support the notion that by the time Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* was published



there were some who saw the promise in distancing themselves from the common English opinion concerning life in the “wilderness.”

The most common criticism Bradstreet’s early poetry receives is that it is too imitative of her British forbearers; however, it is also important to remember that the British lyric was one of the primary forms of poetry available to her. White writes of Bradstreet’s several literary influences, including Shakespeare, du Bartas and most significantly, Sir Philip Sidney, stating, “Anne’s earliest memorial tribute, ‘An Elegy upon that Honourable and renowned Knight Sir Philip Sidney,’ makes it clear that she had read with thoughtful and somewhat critical interest her kinsman’s *Arcadia* and his *Astrophel and Stella*” (62). Although Bradstreet’s “Quaternions” seem to follow in the same sequential structure as a poem like *Astrophel and Stella*, for example, it is the dissimilarities in her work that really showcase Bradstreet’s poetry as breaking away from the British tradition.

Typically, Renaissance poetry is written in sonnet form (Shakespearian or Petrarchan) and in a very sophisticated syntax. In addition, most Renaissance sonnets commonly focus on subjects like love, intimacy and sexual relations (although they do share with Bradstreet a particular emphasis on dying), while she is concerned in her poetry with surviving in the New England environment. Examining a portion of Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* as an example of typical Renaissance poetry assists in distinguishing Bradstreet’s “Quaternions” from this very specific, very British style. In the first sonnet he writes:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That the dear she might take some pleasure of my pain,  
Pleasure might cause her to read, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain:

I sought fit words to pain the blackest face of woe,  
Studying interventions fine, her wits to entertain. (99)

The first few lines of Bradstreet's "Four Elements" sound much different from Sidney. She writes:

The Fire, Air Earth, and Water did contest  
Which was the strongest, noblest and the best,  
Who was of the greatest use and might'est force  
In placid terms they thought now to discourse. (18)

By simply looking at the two passages, there is a clear visual difference between the two; Bradstreet is using iambic pentameter and writing in heroic couplets, while Sidney is writing in a more developed, sophisticated style. Arner states, "Read alone Bradstreet's lyrics are mediocre at best, but to fully appreciate the beauty of her poetry it must be read in continuum with the others, especially "The Quaternions" (48). However, the simplicity of her verse should not imply that the structure or subject matter is of any less importance, especially when one is considering how it lends itself to the development of the early American experience. It is often the case that writers use simpler structures when working with complex subjects; therefore, it is likely that Bradstreet's choice to use a simple structure is reflective of her dealing with the trauma and change that came from settling in a new environment.

Wendy Martin expands on the dissimilarities between Bradstreet and her Renaissance counterparts. Although she is using concepts like the four elements and humours, images that were commonly found in their poetry, she is using them in radically different ways. She states, "...These writers perceived the cosmos as unified by elaborate correspondences... However, Bradstreet diverges from her male models in eliminating the heirachy, or the great chain of

being, that great chain of being, that gave structure to the Elizabethan world” (43). Martin uses Edmund Spenser’s “An Hymn in Honor of Love” as an example, stating that the conflict between his earth, air, water, and fire is resolved when love “unite[s] the rebellious elements by establishing territories for each of them” (44). However, Bradstreet rejects the concept of resolution through the establishment of a hierarchy; instead, she resolves the argument among her elements, and eventually her humours, through “mutuality and cooperation” (44). At first, this may seem like a relatively unimportant difference between Bradstreet and her contemporaries; however, it shows that she is actively distancing herself from the inherently British, (European for that matter) concepts like the separation of kingdoms into territories and an overall pecking order. Furthermore, Bradstreet faced a dilemma that her male counterparts did not.

As a female poet, she could not call upon the same female muses that most Renaissance poets alluded to in their invocations. Martin comments on how the male poet often “dedicated his work to Calliope, or Stella, or the dark lady” and by doing so “achieve[d] the stance of selflessness” (39). However, Bradstreet could not dedicate her work to such muses. She faced the predicament of creating a new approach for her dedications and naturally turned toward the most important figures in her life, both personally and spiritually. Bradstreet “not surprisingly...dedicated her work to male figures--her father, admired poets, God--who unlike their female counterparts were powerful and accomplished, and in the case of God, omnipotent” (Martin 39). This stress on family and spirituality provides a clear connection between Bradstreet and the New World, rather than between Bradstreet and England. During the early years of the settlement, emphasis was not on the individual but on the family unit. Every member of the family played a unique role in working toward the ultimate goal of survival. Bradstreet’s later

poetry would focus more on these topics, after she had established herself as a prominent and respected poet in the colonies.

Bradstreet's subtle references to her experience of living in the New World are sometimes difficult to decipher because they are hidden in the verses of poems that are dealing with the nature of mankind in general. When reading her early works it is appropriate to keep in mind the harrowing conditions Bradstreet would have encountered on board the *Arbella* and in her first months in Massachusetts Bay. This also allows the reader to accurately perceive how the references to these conditions make sense in a larger construction of an early American subject matter. Currently on the Bradstreet gate at Harvard yard, there is a plaque that reads, "I came into this country, where I found a new world and new manners at which my heart rose." This quote from Bradstreet is taken out of context; these words are found in a letter where she is actually describing that her "heart rose" at the despairing scene she had found in New England. There was also her voyage to the New World, a journey that was more emotionally strenuous than the threat of any physical malady. In his journal, John Winthrop describes a typical experience on the sea: "About four in the morning the wind slacked a little, yet it continued a great storm still...the sea was so high as it tossed us more than before, and we carried no more but our mainsail" (33). Disease and subsequent fatality were not as rampant on board the *Arbella* as would be expected of a ship headed to the New World; however, Bradstreet and her family left England prepared for their deaths while at sea.

David Cressy writes of how several Puritans prepared ahead of time for their ultimate fate; one Richard Swayne was so "fearful when he emigrated to New England in 1635 that he distributed his family on four different vessels," clearly to avoid the deaths of his entire family (147). Ironically, maintaining good health on board the ships was fairly common, and aside from

the occasional outbreak of smallpox and dysentery, “transatlantic travel was generally healthier in the 1630’s than in the centuries of mass emigration that followed” (148). However, Bradstreet was torn over leaving England for the New World. Cressy writes of this dilemma, “The ship became a liminal space, floating free of conventional considerations. Even the tyranny of time was transformed... [the sea] had nothing in common with the rhythms of a Suffolk Village” (151). Like most Puritans, she struggled with determining exactly who she was while at sea. Surely she was still a devout Puritan, but the ocean’s “liminal space” caused her to reconsider whether or not her patriotic loyalties still lay with England.

Following her arrival in the colonies during the winter months, Bradstreet would soon recognize that her time on the *Arbella* was not nearly as chaotic as her first months in New England would become. It was during these early years that Bradstreet began writing her series of five quaternions, including “The Four Elements,” “Of the Four Humours,” “Of the Four Ages,” “The Four Seasons” and “The Four Monarchies.”<sup>1</sup> Like several of her contemporaries, Bradstreet believed in the science of Humoralism, a concept best associated with Hippocrates that “considers illness to be the result of some disturbance in the natural balance of the humours, within the body as a whole or within one particular part” (Nutton 281). Thus, it would make sense that Bradstreet would order them in this sequence. Still, the inclusion of these popular scientific facts alone should not account for her poetry imitating that of her British peers. As Arner writes, “The interrelationships established among apparently unrelated pieces provide *The Tenth Muse* with a complexity which has previously gone undiscerned and which makes the book more valuable... than generations of critics seem to have suspected” (48). By beginning her

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, I will be focusing on the first four quaternions, starting with “The Four Elements” and ending with “The Four Seasons.” I will address the last quaternion, “The Four Monarchies” but not in as much depth as I do the previous four.

quaternions with “The Four Elements” and progressing toward “The Four Seasons,” Bradstreet is demonstrating movement from something that is inherently chaotic and uncontrollable (like Fire) to something more predictable (like the few months that constitute Summer). In fact, Bradstreet’s positioning of her quaternions in this order is representative of her coming to terms with a new life in New England. It begins in chaos, but in time her confidence in the New World experiment grows. Although “The Four Seasons” ends with Bradstreet claiming that her “subject’s bare, my brain is bad,” by the time she actually ends the quaternions she has effectively developed an early American subject that relays the Puritan’s initial suffering. By the time she writes “A Dialogue between Old England and New, Anno 1642,” the focus has moved from the harrowing New England landscape to the political struggle she and her fellow emigrants would endure until the end of English Civil War. Bradstreet manages to demonstrate the unique perspective of a woman who is fully aware of the enormity and vastness of the world around her; and yet still weaves into her verses the Puritan’s challenging experiences in developing and sustaining just one small sector of what would become America.

In “The Four Elements,” Fire, Air, Earth and Water represent sisters who are fighting for supremacy as the strongest and noblest of elements; the body of the poem consists of each sister making her case for the desired title. Fire begins the debate by proclaiming she is the provider for artists, mechanics, and men at war, whose tools cannot be molded without her. She is the heat from the sun to warm her “Cold sister Earth” and will consume all the Earth in its final days. Earth follows Fire; she is the origin of “man and beast...vineyards, garden, orchards, and cornfields,” while her cities continuously grow in population. She is the holder of all countries, mountains, seas and kingdoms (Bradstreet 23). Water replies to her sisters’ discourses; she is the drink of man, “the springs below and the showers from above.” She denies Earth’s claims to the

seas, and in her possession holds every lake, sea, river and pond. Lastly, Air is the “breath of every living soul;” the sky where birds fly and preserver of all living things (32). The poem ends with Air’s final word, possibly implying that Air has won the debate, and yet there is no definitive resolution.

Each element has several allusions disguised in metaphor to the early American experience. Before Fire begins her speech, there is a small introduction that describes the nature of the sisters’ argument in which Bradstreet writes, “The sea did threat the heavens, the heavens the earth/All looked like a chaos or new birth” (18). Chaos and new birth seem like opposing ideas, but they are not terms used coincidentally. When the Puritan’s set out for New England, they viewed it as a sort of “new birth,” or at least a rebirth. The new world was to provide for them a new promised land, as evidenced in John Winthrop’s famous sermon, “A Modell of Christian Charity.” Bradstreet would have been subjected to the excitement of the new world, but neither she nor anyone else on board the *Arbella* was prepared for the chaos they found when finally landing in Massachusetts Bay. The notion of a “new birth” quickly changing to “chaos” leads to a longer section of Earth’s speech:

“And how I oft work man’s 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 wants:  
The corn and hay do fall before they’re mown  
And buds from fruitful trees as soon as blown;  
Then dearth prevails, that nature to suffice

The mother on her tender infant flies;  
The husband knows no wife, nor fathers sons,  
But to all outrages their hunger runs. (25)

The suffering described in this passage would have been quite common for many families in the settlement's early years. When they arrived, the Puritans did not expect to find such a dense forest, which immediately sparked fears that their promised land was actually in the devil's hands. The "thistles and thorns where he expected grain" accurately depicts a landscape that the first group of Puritan's arriving on the continent would have encountered. Bradstreet alludes to the problems of survival at Massachusetts Bay in a passage from Water's speech:

The farmer and the grazier do complain  
Of rotten sheep, lean kine, and mildered grain  
And with my wasting floods and roaring torrent  
Their cattle, hay, and corn I sweep down current. (29)

When Bradstreet finally arrived in the summer, the conditions were similar to what is described in these passages. They are best described in a letter written by Thomas Dudley to Lady Bridget, the Countess of Lincoln: "Our four ships which set out in April arrived here in June and July, where 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" (qtd. in White 113). Similar reports are echoed in other settler's diaries, most frequently in Winthrop's journals. In one section, he explains that when the first group of Puritans arrived at New England during the winter, "near half of their people" died of scurvy (58). Charlotte Gordon writes in her biography on Bradstreet that "Between April and December, more than two hundred of the one thousand immigrants



died...and two hundred more fled back to England” (Chapter 9). The large number of people succumbing to the new landscape, not to mention the immediate migration back to England, must have left Bradstreet unsure of the choice she made to leave her homeland. The instability among the sisters in both “The Four Elements” and “Of the Four Humours” are probably reflective of the instability she was feeling in this new colonial environment.

The second quaternion, “Of the Four Humours of Man’s Constitution,” continues in a similar fashion and serves as a sequel to “The Four Elements.” By this point in the Quaternions, it is clear that Bradstreet is drawing on the science of “humoralism”; however, she is using it in way that is unique to the Puritan experience. New England weather conditions and landscape were so radically different from England’s that Bradstreet was concerned about how the new location would affect the Puritans’ bodies and minds. In Trudy Eden’s essay on the body in early Virginia, she discusses how problems with the environment in that area arose in terms of the new types of foods to which they were now exposed. She writes:

...English men and women migrated to the Chesapeake region of North America, an environment lacking in traditional English foodstuffs, and faced a radical dietary change. It was an adaptation that many didn’t make because they perceived that consumption of the Amerindian diet would produce undesirable physical, mental, and moral changes. It would eradicate their Englishness. (30)

It is very likely that these same challenges plagued the colonists in Massachusetts Bay. Not only were they facing the likelihood of starvation as a result of the very little food available but what they did have to eat was grown in a strange environment. Not only did this food counteract the balance of the humours, there was also the horrifying possibility of turning “native” after eating this “harmful” Amerindian food.

Eden continues in her analysis of the Chesapeake environment that “refined foods made “civilized” bodies and gross foods made “grotesque” ones” (33). She explains that there are certain foods that were considered “dense and heavy” including “beans, rice, all whole grains, unleavened bread, and potages” that the stomach did not digest well. For most English people, these foods would be categorized as the type that made one “grotesque.” Furthermore, they believed that Englishness “derived from the ingestion of English foods and exposure to the English climate” (33). However, the “grotesque” foods were also the ones easiest to grow and distribute in New England; thus, they were the kinds of food the Puritans would have to eventually consume if they wanted to remain alive in this environment. Because the diet and environment in North America were so radically dissimilar from the ones in England, most Europeans and English settlers believed that the temperaments would inherently be different as well (Eden 34). Clearly, Bradstreet would have been fearful of distress to the body, but more significantly she would have been disturbed by the notion of losing her “Englishness.” Already hesitant to move her life to the New World, separation from the food and environment that she was so used to must have produced horror, adding to the distress that her body was already experiencing.

It is not terribly surprising that Bradstreet is the poet to write about concerns regarding the body in this new environment. As Jean Marie Lutes states, “caring for bodies in seventeenth-century New England was in many ways a female calling” (310). Not only were women expected to aid each other during labor and childbirth but they also were expected to care for the infants; “the burden of keeping children healthy fell primarily on women, many of whom could not have found a male doctor to call had they wanted to consult one” (310) With these

expectations, it is only natural that Bradstreet had the well-being of her fellow Puritans constantly in mind.

By the end of "Of the Four Humours," however, Bradstreet might be providing the first hint that her stress from the new environment is starting to dissipate. Throughout the "Elements" and the "Humours," the sisters are consistently fighting, insulting and disgracing each other.

However, the end of the "Humours" finally settles the debate. It ends with Phlegm, who states:

A golden ring, the posy UNITY,  
Nor jars nor scarfs, let none hereafter see  
But all admire our perfect amity  
Nor be discerned, here's water, earth, air, and fire  
But here's a compact body, whole entire  
This loving council pleased them all so well  
That Phlegm was judged for kindness to excel. (50)

It is probable that the bickering is representative of Bradstreet's uneasiness with her new life; however, the conclusion of the sister's fight is indicative of the end of her own internal struggle—the one Bradstreet had been battling since her time on board the *Arbella*. According to Eden, the English, "when considered as a group, . . . were phlegmatic because they lived in a cold, damp climate and ate the flora and fauna that grew there" (31). It also makes sense that Bradstreet would end with Phlegm, as it was the humour most associated with "Englishness." Therefore, if phlegm is representative of Englishness for Bradstreet, bringing peace to the sisters may be representative of Bradstreet starting to find glimpses of hope in the New World experiment; with this hope also grows her confidence in not only her new home but in her role as a poet as well. Despite this glimpse, however, Bradstreet continues with her report of the devastation in the

colonies, as seen again in her description of “childhood” in “Of the Four Ages of Man,” the third quaternion in the series.

“Of the Four Ages of Man” and the fourth quaternion “The Four Seasons of the Year” are connected to the first two quaternions in the way they continue with the family dynamic (for example, Childhood is the son of Phlegm and the grandson of Water). However, these last two do not follow the format of a debate as do the sisters in “The Elements” and “The Humours.”

“The Humours” is more of a sequel to the “The Elements,” since it ends the argument among the mothers and daughters, and their sons begin a new peaceful discussion in their own quaternion.

In a small introduction to the rest of the poem, Bradstreet introduces the four stages of life, which include Childhood and Youth, the Manly, and Old Age. She depicts the problems with childhood as being “In danger every moment of a fall,/And when ‘tis broke then ends his life and all:/ But if we hold till it have run its last, Then may he live out threescore years or past” (55).

The high rate of infant deaths in the colonies accounts for Bradstreet’s grim perspective on childhood, and this passage would come to haunt her in the future. She successfully delivered eight children of her own; however, having several grandchildren would not be a part of her life.

Gordon explains how in the space of five years, Bradstreet lost not only her daughter-in-law, Mercy, but the four children that Mercy bore before bearing the fifth child, whom she named Anne (Chapter 9).

While the loss of children at young ages was not unique to the colonial experience, the impact it had on how a woman was perceived in the eyes of her fellow colonists was intense and negative. In the case of Anne Hutchinson’s miscarriage, which resulted in a child who was severely deformed, John Winthrop “lost no time in making the connection between the miscarriage and Hutchinson’s spiritual error” (Martin 64). Clearly, Hutchinson would have had

immediate judgments made about her due to the chaos she created in the church. Because Bradstreet and Hutchinson were friends, Bradstreet would have been fully aware of the connection made between Hutchinson's losses and her spiritual state, most likely prompting nervousness for her own family's losses as well.

In the soliloquy of "Middle Age," Bradstreet returns her emphasis to the difficulties in cultivating a new land:

If to agriculture I was ordained,  
Great labours, sorrows, crosses I sustained  
The early cock did summon but in vain  
My wakeful thoughts up to my painful gain:  
My weary beast rest from his toil can find,  
But if I rest the more distressed my mind. (63)

This passage is one of the few at this point in the quaternions that is demonstrative of Bradstreet moving toward acceptance of the land. The language "She is no longer in denial of it, and yet she still feels the frustration of learning the ways of the land, as evidenced in the image of a man whose every thought is preoccupied with it.

In the transition from "Of the Four Ages of Man" to "The Four Seasons" there is also a substantial shift in tone. Bradstreet is describing a larger sense of contentment and this is best illustrated in a passage by Summer, who speaks about the three months she "owns" in a very orderly manner. She says in reference to the month of June:

This month the roses are distilled in glasses  
Whose fragrant smell all made perfumes surpasses.  
The cherry, gooseberry are now in th' prime,

And for all sorts of peas, this is the time. (73)

The imagery here differs greatly from what appears in any of the previous quaternions. In fact, the most disparaging part of “The Four Seasons” is a small part when Winter states “The day much longer than it was before,/The cold not lessened, but augmented more./ Now toes and ears, and fingers often freeze,/And travellers their noses sometimes leese” (77). In fact, Bradstreet is comparing Winter to a “new-born infancy” who is covered in “swaddling clouts” (63). Winter continues to grow, like a baby into an adult, but once the “sun doth shine” it becomes old and eventually fades into Spring (63). The imagery of Winter as a human being, rather than a creature more inherent to the wilderness, demonstrates how Bradstreet is becoming more comfortable with the extreme changing of seasons in the New World. Clearly, the transition that occurs in Bradstreet’s writing from her composition of “The Four Elements” to “The Four Seasons” reveals her coming to terms with her new life.

When Bradstreet first arrived, she, and every other Puritan was a victim of the new landscape. They lived in unstable homes in the middle of the wilderness, were at constant threat of Indian attacks, and were unable to eat the food without fear. However, “The Four Seasons” presents a Bradstreet who has mastered this landscape; she has found solutions to the problems that once plagued her. Bradstreet now has an understanding of what efforts and preparations it takes to survive New England winters, and summers for that matter. Clearly, the progression of the first four quaternions is representative of Bradstreet’s growing confidence and happiness with her new home.

“The Four Seasons” ends the set of quaternions that resonate with Hippocrates’ notion of the four elements and humours. “The Five Monarchies” is the beginning of something new for Bradstreet in that it closely resembles a conventional epic format (without the invocation of the

muse) and because she attempts to retell the history of the world's greatest monarchs. Arner writes of the "The Monarchies" that they "function[s] to balance the easy surrender to masculine virtues in the first section, for insofar as it is mostly an extended criticism of kings and political institutions men have invented, it suggests a questioning of the political acumen" (48). Clearly, any poet might falter at the task of surmounting such a detailed history, and it is not surprising that Bradstreet was never able to finish this poem. "The Four Monarchies" begins with the Assyrian Monarchy, followed by the Persian Monarchy. The "Third Monarchy" is the Grecian Monarchy and the fourth, and uncompleted, is the Roman Monarchy. She ends the poem with an "Apology" that states:

To finish what's begun was my intent...Essays I many made but still gave out,  
The more I mused, the more I was in doubt;  
The subject large, my mind and body weak,  
With many more discouragements did speak. (90)

At this point, Bradstreet has clearly lost her ambition to continue writing, but it is the last lines of her "Apology" that are especially telling of her feelings in attempting to recall history. She writes, "No more I'll do with I have suffered wrack,/Although my monarchies their legs do lack;/Nor matter is't this last, the world now sees,/Hath many ages been upon his knees" (190). Although she is apologetic for her inability to finish, Bradstreet also makes it clear there is no significant need to; the last three monarchies alone demonstrate how easily civilizations can face their demise under long-ruling leaders. She is using the imagery of legs and knees in this passage ironically. *Her* monarchies are left legless because she does not complete the last (and probably most important section), the one on the Roman Monarchy. However, those kingdoms that existed

in reality, outside of her text, were never graced with “legs” either since they all eventually met their ruinous ends.

Having completed four quaternions that indicate Bradstreet is moving away from a British-centered theme and style, it is unusual that she now decides to return her focus to Europe in the last quaternion. It is possible that this return is a reconciliation for Bradstreet. Finally accepting her life in the colonies, and her burgeoning new identity as a “colonist,” she may finally have the courage to face what she left behind. It is possible that Bradstreet never finished “The Four Monarchies” because she was simply tired of writing about monarchies; therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that she also felt confidence in her distance from Europe, with an entire ocean separating her, to openly express that she was finally leaving England, and Europe, behind her. Maybe it was Bradstreet’s open disapproval of European politics in “The Four Monarchies” that inspired her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, to bring a manuscript of the *Tenth Muse* to publisher Master Stephen Bowtell in England. Bowtell, a “publisher and bookseller in London from 1643 to 1664,” was known as a “producer of political rather than religious books” (White 252). Bradstreet’s references to the political are demonstrative of all the colonists’ lives, for that matter, in determining their place in the New World while their homeland slowly deteriorated before their eyes. She makes several hints at political themes in the Quaternions, starting with the “The Four Elements,” where Fire states:

What famous towns to cinders have I turned?

What lasting forts my kindled wrath hath burned?

The stately seats of mighty kings by me

In confused heaps of ashes may you see...And stately London (our great Britain’s glory)

My raging flame did make a mournful story,



But maugre all, that I, or foes could do

That Phoenix from her bed is risen new. (22)

There are several ways this passage can be interpreted. The most basic way is that the phoenix is Fire herself, always rising anew from the ashes she has created. A second way, a more historical interpretation, views this passage as a short allegory for the chaos in England that forced families like the Dudley's and Bradstreet's to find refuge in the New World. The raging flame is representative of Charles I and his tyrannical policies against the Puritan church; however, from this fire the Phoenix is "risen new" in the form of the Massachusetts Bay settlement. It is appropriate that Fire is the element through which Bradstreet chooses to express her political sensibilities, as Choler continues (Fire's daughter) in "Of the Four Humours," claiming that she is the only humour befitting of Kings:

Their wrathful looks are death, their words are laws;

Their courage friend and foe and subject awes;

But one of you, would make a worthy king

Like our sixth Henry (that same virtuous thing)

That when a varlet struck him o're the side,

"Forsooth you are to blame," he grave replied.

Take Choler from a prince, what is he more

Than a dead lion, by beasts triumphed o're. (38)

This passage seems a little vague at first; the reference to Henry VI, known for being "virtuous" and often pious (despite his later mental breakdown), is clearly Bradstreet making a comparison to Charles I, who at the time was the clear opposite of a King, respected by those like the Bradstreets. More significantly, it is also here that she is revealing her stance on how Kings and

presumably Princes should behave. The lines “Take Choler from a prince, what is he more/Than a dead lion, by beasts triumphed o’re” read like a Machiavellian principle, a theory that Bradstreet, as an educated and politically astute individual, would have known fairly well. This passage is closely followed by a section in “Blood’s” speech that reads:

So shed’st that blood, thou’re bounden to preserve.

Wilt thou this valour, courage, manhood call?

No, know; this pride most diabolical

If murders be thy glory, ‘tis no less,

I’ll not envy thy feats, nor happiness:

But if in fitting time and place ‘gainst foes

For countries’ good thy life thou dar’st expose,

Be dangers n’er so high, and courage great. (41)

Through Blood’s voice, Bradstreet is attempting to make clear her personal opinion on war. She is suggesting that pride is not worth the price of life, the blood; but if a country must defend itself against foes, then it is surely worth the battle. This differs slightly from the Machiavellian sentiment expressed in Choler’s speech; however, the most important aspect of these lines is how carefully Bradstreet has woven her political views into her verse. At no time in her life did Bradstreet yearn to disrupt the boundaries that separated the public sphere from the private (or, in other words, the man’s sphere from the women’s), like her sister, Sarah Bradstreet, a follower of Anne Hutchinson who was also shunned by the Puritan community. Still, it cannot be ignored that she had private access to the political turbulence in England through the very significant roles that men like her husband, Simon Bradstreet, and her father had in the colonies. Bradstreet must also have been nervous about the increasing amount of bloodshed occurring in England due

in part to the fanaticism amongst the Puritans. Gordon states that “Even English Puritans were worried by such fierce intolerance; they had seen the bloodshed it could cause, and they wrote letters urging their New England counterparts to relent and accept non-Puritans into their towns” (location 4391).

The confidence that Bradstreet was apparently lacking to make political strife a main component of her assessment of New England in the Quaternions is no longer a problem by the time she writes “A Dialogue between Old England and New.” Like the female voices she uses to personify the elements and humours, Bradstreet uses a mother /daughter metaphor to represent Old and New England, and it is typically regarded as Bradstreet’s best attempt at using personification. However, the mother /daughter metaphor was not entirely unheard of before the poem was published. In a letter to John Winthrop, his nephew, Benjamin Gostlin, still in England, writes “...the Lord be mercyfull unto us and turne the Kings hart or else to this Land in my foolish Iudgment...therefore I beseech you to pray for us if ever mother had neede of Dawghters helps now it hath...” (qtd. in White 159). The desperation seen in the content of this letter is also evident in Bradstreet’s poem as well, which suggests that Bradstreet herself is the voice of New England.

The poem consists of a back and forth dialogue between mother and daughter, starting with the daughter (New England) who is attempting to find the reason for her mother’s discontent. She begins:

Alas dear Mother, fairest Queen and best,  
With honour, wealth, and peace, happy and blest;  
What ails thee hang thy head, and cross thine arms?  
And sit i’ th’ dust, to sigh these sad alarms?

What deluge of new woes thus overwhelm

The glories of thy ever famous realm?

What means this wailing tone, this mournful guise?

Ah, tell thy daughter, she may sympathize. (191)

New England continues to search for the cause of her mother's grief; she asks if it is the invasion of the Normans and Danes? Or is it Maud and Stephen's contention for the crown? Or must Richard II be "clapt in th' tower?" (192). She continues in this fashion until Old England confesses it is no "foreign foe, nor feigned friend" (193) but instead hints at the internal destruction of the English church, though at first it does not say so out right. Instead, she frets over the "Martyrs and others, dying causelessly" for a "fading crown" and the "destruction to my wicked land"<sup>2</sup> as the result of a "plague of stubborn incredulity" (195). New England takes some responsibility for the present issue; however, she becomes quickly becomes impatient with Old England's inability to openly admit to the problem. At this point it is important to recognize the distinction in their labels as mother and daughter. For Bradstreet, the labels represent two distinct entities; they are no longer entirely English and hence culturally separated (and to a certain extent, nationally separated) from their homeland. White makes clear the New England Puritans were still loyal to their homeland; however, the daughter's sense of authority that allows her to speak to her mother as a parental figure demonstrates the growing confidence of the colonies to function and exist on their own. When Bradstreet writes, "What deluge of new woes thus overwhelm/The glories of thy ever famous realm," there is a touch of sarcasm in her tone, indicating that it is ironic that the motherland is undergoing more civil trauma than the newly

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<sup>2</sup> White discusses how this quote is in reference to punishment inflicted upon Puritan's who chose to speak out, through sermon and printed word, against the abuses by the Catholic Church (162).

created “daughterland.” Still, this is not to say that Bradstreet was extremely saddened by and concerned about England’s problems. As Gordon points out, “Anne speaks in the voice of the New World, a vantage point that was impossible for England-bound Milton to achieve. Old England...is a wrecked old woman bound for damnation unless strong, healthy New England can save her” (location 3365). Yet the need for a harmonious relationship between these now separate entities is evident in the daughter’s attempts to remedy her mother’s chaos.

The poem continues with Old England finally admitting that her country is nearing Civil War: “Well to the matter then, there’s grown of late/’Twixt king and peers a question of state,/Which is the chief, the law, or else the king” (196). The imagery Bradstreet uses in Old England’s third section is more vivid than anything she had written in the Quaternions:

Oh pity me in this sad perturbation,  
My plundered towns, my houses’ devastation,  
My weeping virgins and my young men slain... my dearth of Grain,  
The seedtime’s come, but ploughman hath no hope  
Because he knows not who shall in his crop. (198)

New England sympathizes with her mother after hearing these horrifying details, though once again demonstrating the ironic twist in the parent/child relationship. Rather than the mother soothing the daughter’s anxieties, it is a reverse situation, just as the newly founded colonies are lending their guidance and resources to a fully established empire.

Bradstreet ends the poem in New England’s voice, which contains a variety of tones, from anger to love to hopefulness. As Gordon points out, “A Dialogue between Old England and New’ would read almost like a play. She infused tension, suspense, love, and anger into the story, even as she expressed her own feelings over the looming civil war” (location 3364). New

England first emanates anger through Bradstreet's very evident opinion concerning the Catholic Church:

These are the days the Church's foes to crush,  
To root out Popelings head, tail, branch and rush... and such empty trash,  
And let their names consume, but let the flash  
Light Christendom, and all the world to see  
We hate Rome's whore with all her trumpery. (199)

Her use of aggressive language in this passage shows an intense change in Bradstreet's commonly calm and fairly even-tempered tone. The closest she comes to writing with this same type of hostility is when she depicts the animosity between the sisters in "Elements" and "Humours." However, that hostility exists between fictional characters and is not Bradstreet directly speaking; even in those moments when she relates the early American experience in the Quaternions, it is though she is reporting it (granted from a personal perspective) rather than contemplating her opinion as she did in "Dialogue." In early American society, there was a distinct line women knew not to cross when it came to expressing their personal views on politics, government, religions or any of the other "public sphere" subjects that were controlled by the patriarchy<sup>3</sup>. In "Dialogue," Bradstreet comes very close to crossing those boundaries, which supports the notion some scholars have suggested that she was very much privy to information concerning the politics of "old" and New England through her husband's position. Without her access to those otherwise patriarchal subjects, they might have remained confined to

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<sup>3</sup> As stated earlier in this essay, despite her tendency to be "the voice" for Puritan women, Bradstreet also knew where her boundaries lie. I am not suggesting that "Dialogue" is radical on a larger, cultural scale; however, it seems more intense for Bradstreet in comparison to the rest of her repertoire.

the diaries of men rather than working their way into a more publicly available and aesthetic form.

At the end of the poem there is a hopeful outlook. Bradstreet starts with the words “Dear Mother,” which is again evidence of the reversed parent/child relationship; however, it also ends on a note that emanates love for her home country. New England continues:

Shake off your dust, cheer up, and now arise  
Your griefs I pity, but soon hope to see,  
Out of your troubles much good fruit to be,  
To see those latter days of hoped for good,  
Though now beclouded with all tears and blood. (198)

Bradstreet’s hope for reconciliation with England shows in this passage. It is almost indicative of her need for the “mother” and “daughter” to someday be united again, as though she may have hoped for a time when she and her family could return to England. However, Bradstreet’s sentimentality is cut short; the daughter’s last address to Old England is spoken with determination and confidence that would seem unlikely for a daughter speaking to her parent in this period:

And Jew and Gentile to one worship go;  
Then follows days of happiness and rest;  
Whose lot doth fall to live therein is blest:  
No Canaanite shall then be found I’ th’ land,  
And holiness on horses bells shall stand...Farewell, dear Mother, rightest cause prevail,  
And in a while, you’ll tell another tale. (200)

New England's prediction demonstrates wisdom beyond her years, and, simultaneously, her naivete for supposing that the fractioning religions will eventually fall into one, united religion. Bradstreet indicates the closing of the poem by using the word "Farewell," which also represents the final breaking of Old England's reliance on her daughter, at least for now. She sarcastically hints that England might prevail in the strife of Civil War, only to one day find itself in another struggle through which they will also persevere. Bradstreet's use of the word "you'll" is a minor rhetorical move, yet a significant one. Instead of using "we'll" to indicate that both mother and daughter, together as one unit, will "tell another tale," the singular "you" breaks the mother/daughter bond, thus suggesting that Old England's future battles will not be shared with her daughter.

By examining the earlier works of Anne Bradstreet as indicators of the beginning of an early American subject matter, a new picture of her is created. She is not only a poet who happens to be female in a time when most women were not writing; she is first and foremost an American poet. The assumption that her earliest poetry is simply an imitation of British verse is inaccurate, and one that she herself fought against while she was living. The Quaternions and "A Dialogue between Old England and New" may even be more infused with an American subject than her later domestic poetry, which focuses more on her experiences as a woman in the New World. This is evidenced by the allusions to the New England landscape and Bradstreet's ability to finally accept the conditions of her new life and home. She has left us with the creation of a burgeoning early American subject matter. Through her early poetry she was able to fine-tune and develop her skills as a poet who would later produce the more sophisticated poems of her mature years. As the years passed, this early American subject would come to include England's



ever tightening control of the colonies, the Revolution, and the creation of a new government. However, we must recognize that its origins can be found in Bradstreet's earliest poetry.

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