

Getting started with Anne Bradstreet

I am now going through my syllabus for the fall 2016 semester, adding texts that we need. One of the authors I most want to spend time on is Anne Bradstreet. She was the most important Puritan poet in seventeenth-century New England, or, perhaps better, the most important poet whose works have survived to reach us. Her poetry was first published in London, in a book called *The Tenth Muse*, the idea being that a tenth muse had arrived in the Americas, one who was going to add to, or even outdo, the muses of Europe. Her works were widely reprinted, and she continues to be in modern anthologies as a representative figure of Puritan America.

But what shall we read, and where shall we find it? Most of the poems in modern anthologies are the shorter poems, such as the “Verses on the Burning of our House,” or the poems Bradstreet wrote to her husband, or poems about her children. That is, most of these are domestic poems, about her home and family. They’re fine poems, but it’s hard not to think that they’ve been anthologized because they’re 1) short and 2) seem to be about the kinds of things that people expect poetry by women to be about.

But they were not the only kinds of poems that Bradstreet wrote. In fact, most of *The Tenth Muse* is devoted to much longer poems, about the seasons, the history of the world, the rise of empires. I want to make these available somehow, but editing them will be laborious.

In the short term, I want to produce a poem that sort of fits in the middle of the poles of domestic and political poems. It’s Bradstreet’s “A Dialogue Between Old England and New.” Here, the poet imagines a discussion between New England and the homeland, both of them figured as women. It’s a clear

allegory of the English civil war, and also of the hope implied in the title *The Tenth Muse* that America might be able to help the "mother" country overcome its struggles. I am now thinking that we will start the semester with this poem. More to come.