The Author to Her Book

POEM TEXT

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

SUMMARY

My book—you are the deformed child of my weak brain. You stayed beside me after I created you. But then my friends stole you and, perhaps with good intentions, published you abroad. They forced you to go to the printing press, and when you were printed you were still full of errors. When I next saw you I was embarrassed to be the creator of such an unpolished piece of work. I made you this way: so ugly that it's best you stay out of the light. Despite this, however, you are *mine*. And I hope that over time my love for you would help me to fix your problems. I cleaned and scrubbed you, but you just seemed to get more and more blemished; it was as though every time I erased one mark another one would appear. I tried to improve your metrical feet, but still the poems were clunky and clumsy. I would have dressed you better, but I only have the cloth I spin in this house. And it's in this that you must go out into the crude world. Avoid critics, and go where nobody knows you. Tell them you have no father, and that your mother is poor—which is why she sent you on your way.

THEMES

ART AND CREATIVITY

The poem explores the relationship between an artist and their creation through an extended metaphor. The speaker—generally taken to be Bradstreet herself commenting on her one published work, *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America*—reimagines her book as a child, "ill-form'd" and full of "flaws." In doing so, Bradstreet is able to draw out her complex feelings towards her own work and, in common with many artists out there, to express her self-doubt and anxiety. The poem suggests that artistic perfection, or even simple *satisfaction*, is something near-on impossible to achieve—and thus that an author is always bound to feel a sense of disappointment with their work.

While the poem makes wider points about the relationship between an artist and their work, Bradstreet was also making a complaint about her own *specific* situation: her collection of poems was allegedly published without her consent. This heightens the sense in which the speaker feels that her book made public *before* it was ready—before the artist could make it as good as it possibly could be. That's why the book is presented as an ugly, impoverished, and pretty much unloved infant. The imperfections of the book, "pressed" (published) before "errors" could be "lessened," cause the speaker embarrassment ("my blushing"), testifying to the difficulty involved in putting work out into the world.

The poem subsequently moves on to talk about the process of revision—how an artist tries to make improvements to their work. Here, the poem draws out the artistic tension between optimism and hopelessness, the speaker feeling that enough "affection" might "amend" the book's "blemishes"—might make it worthy of a readership. But every adjustment that the artist makes results only in more "flaw[s]." Even given the chance to make the artwork better, the relationship between the artist and their creation remains pained and difficult.

But the poem does see a tentative resolution in the speaker's attitude. Essentially, she admits that, if perfection is unattainable, at some point she has to let go of her hopes about making the book better and just accept it as it is. She cautions the book—still presented as a child—from falling into the harsh hands of critics, but also suggests that the book go "where yet

thou art not known."

In other words, despite everything, the book *should* go out into the world, even though it isn't perfect. Perhaps, then, this is how the poem offers its subtle solution. If perfection can't be achieved, the artist at some point has to accept what they've made—and be done with it. Otherwise, they make nothing, caught in a vicious cycle of improvement and subsequent disappointment. Underscoring the pain and doubt that come with being an artist, the poem ends with Bradstreet characterizing herself as "poor," playing into the poem's overall conceit about impoverishment but also doubling down on her negative assessment of her own work.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).

"The Author to Her Book" is an autobiographical poem in which Bradstreet reflects on the 1650 publication of her collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. Of course, the poem *also* goes beyond the specifics of Bradstreet's situation, forming a broader discussion of the relationship between an artist and their work—a relationship often fraught with difficulty and disappointment.

It's also worth remembering that Anne Bradstreet was one of the first female published poets. Poetry was a gendered environment and much of Bradstreet's early work seems anxious about attaining the standards of male contemporaries. In this poem, though, her appraisal of her own writing seems more intent on the age-old question of whether it's any good.

The poem establishes its mode of address right from the start: apostrophe. The speaker, who in this instance can be fairly equated with Bradstreet herself, talks to her own book—which, of course, can't answer back. The book is personified through an elaborate extended metaphor—also known as a conceit—as an infant child. This, of course, borrows from Bradstreet's own experience as a mother (though by all accounts she was an excellent one!) and as a woman expected to undertake domestic work (and not be wasting time on poetry). The opening line links the weakness of the book to the weakness of Bradsteet's own "feeble brain," gentle /f/ consonance connecting the two together ("ill-formed offspring").

The following lines tell the story—or a story—of Bradstreet's book (it's not known for sure if she wanted it to be published or not). The book was "snatched" by Bradstreet's "friends" (her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, was responsible for the publication), who took it to England to printed. The poem stresses the book's inferiority, using metaphorical poverty to suggest the Bradstreet's supposedly limited abilities as a writer. That's why the book wears "raggs," and is full of "errors."

The multiple caesurae in this section make the poem clunky and cumbersome, fitting in with the way the book is made to "trudge" to the (printing) "press." Bradstreet self-consciously pre-empts any criticism of her work by making that criticism herself, and asserting that others will feel the same way—"all may Judg" (line 6).

LINES 7-10

At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;

In these four lines, the speaker reflects on the embarrassment she felt when she saw her published book (which, it's worth remembering, remains one of the most important poetry collections ever put into print!). The poem describes the book as a "rambling brat," borrowing the image of an unruly and irritating child to convey what the speaker views as a lack of precision and quality. In line 8, the consonance of "rambling brat" is loud, suggesting this unruliness.

In fact, each of these four lines features a mixture of harsh sounds. Note the popping /p/, /b/, /t/, and hard /k/ sounds. Combined with hissing /s/ sibilance, the cacophony of sounds feels almost like someone spitting in disgust:

> At thy return my blushing was not small,
> My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
> I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
> Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;

The book is described as "unfit for light"—that is, the book is so ugly (its "Visage," or face, so "irksome") that it doesn't deserve to be seen at all. The book, then, is not unlike literature's famous "monsters"—Quasimodo, for example, or Frankenstein's creation.

It's worth noting, too, that these lines have echos of the Book of Genesis from the Bible—in which God created the world (and light to shine on it). By subtly evoking that incredible act of creation, Bradstreet deliberately undermines her own, restating her own perceived unworthiness.

Even as the speaker does this, note how steady the poem remains in terms of its rhyme scheme. So far, the poem has consisted of simple rhyming couplets, lending a predictability and self-assuredness even as the speaker disparages her own

work.

LINES 11-14

Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.

Here, the speaker talks about trying to make improvements to her book through revisions and edits. While so far there has been little sign of affection or love between the author and her book—or, in the extended metaphor, between mother and child—a kind of maternal/authorial instinct starts to kick in here.

Though she doesn't *like* the book much, the speaker does have a sense of it as her "own." That is, she takes ownership and responsibility for it. Accordingly, she says that she would make the book better if she could—her "affection" makes her determined to "amend" the book's "blemishes." Lines 11 and 12, then, offer a brief glimpse of optimism.

However, this is swiftly undone by lines 13 and 14. The author *did* try to improve the book—but every time she tried to fix a defect she seemed only to make it worse (to add another "flaw"). No matter how clean she tries to make the book, all it reveals to her are its imperfections. There is a faint suggestion of disease and plague here, with the assonance marking the line with its own spottiness of vowels:

I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.

That is, the paired vowel sounds are meant to come across like a kind of break-out of spots or marks on the skin (on the surface of the poem).

LINES 15-16

I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;

Lines 15 and 16 relate specifically to the art of poetry, with the speaker discussing the revisions she made to her work afters initial publication.

Remember, this is well before the advent of free verse—poetry *was* metrical writing in those days. And that's exactly what the speaker is talking about here: the attempt to perfect her meter (to make the metrical "feet" more even). This is a pun, riffing on the dual meaning of "feet"—and, indeed, a second pun is thrown in for good measure with the rhyme word "meet" (meaning "good" or "appropriate" but also relating to poetic "meter").

The meter of the first quoted line conforms perfectly to iambic pentameter—five feet of da DUM (unstressed-stressed):

I stretched | thy joynts | to make | thee ev- | en feet,

The following line, however, is intentionally more ambiguous and clumsy in its meter. While line 15 describes Bradstreet's metrical *aspiration*, line 16 is about the actual *results*:

Yet still | thou run'st | more hob- | ling then | is meet;

While this line could be read according to the same stresses as the line before, it's also entirely possible that "more" could receive a stress. This *ambiguity* subtly makes the line metrically imperfect—at least according to the parameters suggested by the poem. In other words, the line itself hobbles rather than runs.

LINES 17-19

In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.

Lines 17-19 restate the metaphorical poverty of the author's book. The speaker wishes to clothe the book in "better dress"—to make it more appealing and deserving of praise—but instead emphasizes her humble means. All she has at her disposal is "home-spun Cloth"—garments she has woven herself.

Again and again, then, the speaker restates her own doubts about her craft. Perhaps here the notion of attractive clothing relates to specific poetic techniques. In particular, this might relate to effective and skillful use of things like alliteration, meter, rhyme and so on—the attributes of poetry that convey the control of a craft.

Line 19 marks a subtle but important shift in the poem:

In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.

To a degree, the speaker here comes to terms with the imperfections of her book—a kind of admission that letting-go is really the only course of action, and that perfection according to her own standards is unattainable. Her book must "roam" amongst "Vulgars"—probably a reference to the general public. A "vulgar" is an old word for a common/ordinary person. In a funny way, perhaps this an accidental compliment on the book's behalf—by *not* being overly flighty or steeped in outdated classical references, the best of Bradstreet's poetry maintains a readability even hundreds of years later—read by vulgars like us!

LINES 20-24

In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

Lines 20 and 21 are a warning to the author's fledgling book

who, in its metaphorical role as an impoverished child, is about to set off on their own life independent of the mother (the author). The speaker warns the book to avoid "Criticks hands," most likely because she feels it won't meet their high standards. (Ironically, the book now commands considerably more critical respect than most work of its era!) In line 21, the speaker implores the book to go where it is "not known"—to make its own path in their world, and to have a life independent of its author. It seems, on balance, she just about favors this option over not publishing it at all.

The last three lines return to discussing the poem's metaphorical parents. Because the book was made by a woman, it has no father—perhaps hinting that, in transgressing the usual gender norms, the book might also be viewed as un-Christian (by going against the will of the "Father," God). Likewise, if creativity is a kind of divine inspiration—as it has often been characterized—Bradstreet here is subtly suggesting that God had *no* hand in her work. It is, flaws and all, her own.

Finally, the poem restates the "Mother's" impoverishment—the speaker's own self-professed inferiority. The speaker is playing on the double meaning of the word "poor" here as well, implying not just her writerly shortcomings but the notion that she must sell the book because she needs the money. Like a parent may send their child off to work, the speaker must send her book off into the world in the hopes of getting some its earnings back.

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "The Author to Her Book." The poem relies on frequent rhyming couplets, which add a sense of steadiness and regularity throughout. There is assonance within lines as well, which sometimes evoke the sense of a phrase via sound. In line 2, for example, the speaker describes her book as having stayed "by my side" after birth (the book is metaphorically transformed into a child throughout the poem). These three identical vowel sounds have the effect of clinging to the ear, as though they can't be shaken off. They represent, then, the closeness with which the author kept her book—until it was snatched from "thence" by "friends" and published abroad.

Another interesting example is in line 6, in which the speaker states that, though her book was published, no one edited it to make it better:

> Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
> Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).

Here, similar /e/ sounds impose themselves on the poem, representing just how many supposed errors exist in the book.

Later, in lines 13 and 14, the speaker describes trying to make edits/improvements to her book without much success:

> I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
> And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.

These /aw/ sounds also use prominent patterning to suggest the presence of something undesired—in this case "spots" and "defects." Similar vowel sounds appear like boils or pustules on diseased skin.

In another striking example, line 15 uses assonance in its pun on human feet/metrical feet:

> I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,

These long /e/ vowels stretch the poem's sound, evoking the image of joints being stretched and suggesting the metrical "even[ness]" that the author aspires/aspired to in her art.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "brain"
- **Line 2:** "by my side," "remain"
- **Line 3:** "thence," "friends," "less," "true"
- **Line 4:** "view"
- **Line 5:** "press," "trudge"
- **Line 6:** "Where errors were," "lessened," "judg"
- **Line 7:** "thy," "my," "small"
- **Line 8:** "in print," "call"
- **Line 9:** "by," "light"
- **Line 10:** "my sight"
- **Line 11:** "would"
- **Line 12:** "blemishes amend," "could"
- **Line 13:** "wash'd," "saw"
- **Line 14:** "off," "spot," "flaw"
- **Line 15:** "thee even feet"
- **Line 16:** "meet"
- **Line 17:** "better dress," "my mind"
- **Line 18:** "I find"
- **Line 19:** "array," "mayst"
- **Line 20:** "In Criticks"
- **Line 23:** "poor"
- **Line 24:** "door"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is an important feature of "The Author to Her Book," present from the first word to the last. The whole poem takes the form of an address spoken from the "author" directed "to her Book." The speaker talks to the book as if it were her child, and accordingly the poem is full of the second-person pronouns "thou" and "thee." The book, of course, can't answer back, allowing the speaker to focus entirely on her own feelings and judgements about the quality of her work. And because she

created the work, the apostrophe throughout actually means she's essentially talking to herself.

In directly addressing her book as though it were capable of understanding her, however, the speaker actually affords it a kind of backward compliment. There is a sincerity to the communication here that reflects the speaker's intense wish for her work to be perfect, or at least to be better than it actually is. The use of apostrophe also works well as a framing device, allowing the author to explain *to the book* why it finds itself in the world that it does—and why it looks/sounds/behaves the way it does too. The apostrophe also serves an important function of allowing the speaker to anticipate, and ward off, any external criticism of her work—in other words, *she* puts her book down herself before others can do so.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-24
- Lines 4-5
- Line 7
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 15-16

CAESURA

Caesurae occur throughout "The Author to Her Book." The pauses within the lines are all commas, and together they serve one major purpose: to make the poem less smooth and "more hobling" (hobbling). That is, caesurae are used to make this poem itself seem like it fits with the book being described—which the speaker states is full of "errors," "blemishes," and "spot[s]." If every line were written in perfect, flowing iambic pentameter, the poem might sound too well-made rather than "ill-form'd." That isn't to say that the poem *doesn't* have its own sense of flow and momentum, but more that the caesurae are used to make it less predictable.

Caesurae are also used in lines 13 and 14 to create a kind of parallel effect:

> I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
> And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.

The first clause in each line (before the respective caesurae) relates to trying to clean the child's skin (a metaphorical description for the author's attempts to improve her book). The second clauses then explain how each attempt seemed only to reveal yet *another* "flaw" or "defect." The caesurae, then, balance an action on one side and the result on the other.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “,”
- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “,”
- **Line 22:** “,” “,”
- **Line 23:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs throughout "The Author to Her Book." The lines are rich with repeated sound, suggesting that the speaker's "brain" is not quite as feeble as she is making it out to be! The speaker uses consonance to add musicality to the poem and also to draw attention to some key ideas. The first important example is in fact in the poem's very first line:

> Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,

The opening line establishes the poem's extended metaphor—the book as the author's "ill-form'd offspring." In other words, the book is flawed because the author is flawed too (in Bradstreet's own view of herself). The /f/ sounds here are gentle, linking two different sets of weaknesses together: the author's and her book's.

The poem later clusters /r/ consonance tightly into line 6:

> Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).

These consonant sounds represent the apparent number of "errors" in the book—indeed, this line is somewhat hard to say. It trips on the tongue, intentionally evoking the way that the speaker views her own poetry as somehow inferior.

In lines 8 and 9, /t/ consonance links the author's "brat" (her book) with "print," "cast," and the phrase "unfit for light." These /t/ sounds poke out of the poem, intentionally at odds with the softer sounds that surround them, and help to convey the book's/the child's alleged ugliness. Again, then, the speaker uses consonance in a way that reveals her talent with language even as she insists that her work leaves much to be desired.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ill-form'd offspring,” “feeble brain”
- **Line 2:** “after birth,” “by,” “remain”
- **Line 3:** “snatched,” “thence,” “friends,” “less wise”
- **Line 4:** “abroad,” “expos'd,” “publick”
- **Line 5:** “halting,” “ to,” “press,” “to trudge”

- **Line 6:** “Where,” “errors,” “lessened,” “judg”
- **Lines 6-6:** “ / were”
- **Line 7:** “return,” “blushing,” “small”
- **Line 8:** “rambling,” “brat,” “in print,” “call”
- **Line 9:** “cast,” “one unfit for,” “light”
- **Line 10:** “Visage was so irksome,” “sight”
- **Line 11:** “mine own,” “would”
- **Line 12:** “blemishes amend,” “could”
- **Line 13:** “face,” “defects,” “saw”
- **Line 14:** “off,” “spot,” “still,” “flaw”
- **Line 15:** “stretched,” “joynts,” “to,” “feet”
- **Line 16:** “still,” “run’st,” “meet”
- **Line 17:** “better,” “to trim,” “my mind”
- **Line 18:** “But nought,” “home-spun,” “Cloth,” “th,” “find”
- **Line 19:** “’mongst Vulgars,” “ mayst,” “roam”
- **Line 20:** “In Criticks hands,” “dost not,” “come”
- **Line 21:** “take,” “way where,” “known”
- **Line 22:** “If for thy Father,” “askt,” “say,” “none”
- **Line 23:** “thy Mother,” “alas is,” “poor”
- **Line 24:** “caus’d,” “thus,” “send,” “door”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used just once in "The Author to Her Book," which makes this moment all the more striking. Take a look at the break between lines 11 and 12:

> Yet being mine own, at length affection would
> Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:

The enjambment is partly just a practical way for the sentence to extend across two lines, and thus preserve the rhyme scheme here (that is, it ends line 11 on "would" which then rhymes perfectly with "could" in line 12). But there is another clue to the purpose of this enjambment in line 11—the word "length." The speaker here describes a lengthy process by which she wanted and *tried* to improve her book, to remove some of the "blemishes," "errors," and "spots" that made it supposedly inferior to other work. Increasing the sentence length here mirrors the persistence with which the speaker approached that task—which ultimately proved fruitless.

The lack of punctuation at the end of line 11 could also be interpreted as a subtle example of the *lack* of a blemish—that is, while commas, semi-colons, and full stops mark the endings of all the other lines in the poem, here the desire *to do away* with these imperfections subtly plays out in the white space at the end of this particular line.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** “would / Thy”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"The Author to Her Book" is one long, elaborate extended metaphor, also known as a conceit. The speaker's book—a reference to Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up America*—becomes the "ill-form'd offspring" of the author's "feel brain." In other words, the author is the mother in this metaphor and the book is the child.

This metaphor allows for the poem to explore the speaker's ambiguous feelings towards her own book, in part because, as the metaphorical mother, she is meant to care for and nurture her book. Yet, though there is a degree of maternal instinct on display in the poem, the speaker also clearly resents the imperfections of her book—and, accordingly, of her own poetic talents. Importantly, the metaphor also allows for the poem to establish a hereditary chain of responsibility for the books's/child's ugliness. That is, the book is full of "blemishes," "defects," "spot[s]," and "flaw[s]" precisely *because* it is the *child* of this particular author.

Finally, the metaphor allows the speaker to anticipate potential criticism of her own work. For example, line 15 takes self-targeted aim at her poetry's poor use of meter (again, this is the speaker's own opinion!). So human feet become metrical feet, allowing for the speaker to name the flaws in her work before someone else—one of those "Criticks"—does.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

PUN

There is one pun in "The Author to Her Book," found lines 15 and 16:

> I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
> Yet still thou run’st more hobling then is meet;

The poem uses its extended metaphor—which presents the book as the author's ugly, "ill-form'd offspring"—to discuss a specific element of poetic craft: meter. It's worth remembering that meter and poetry were pretty much inseparable in the time Bradstreet was writing—the idea of free verse (poetry without meter) only appeared around two centuries later.

Literally speaking, the speaker here describes trying to improve her child's feet by stretching its joints—nevertheless, the child continued to hobble around more than it should. Of course, this *isn't* meant to be taken literally, but rather this pun is an imaginative way for the speaker to say that the more she tried to fix the flaws in her poetic meter, the more that meter just seemed clunky and cumbersome.

To take a step back, remember that poetic feet are simply the units of meter—those things like iambs and trochees that make

up a line of verse. When writing using an established meter, poets want to craft lines that follow along with an expected rhythm. For instance, take what is probably the most famous meter of all: iambic pentameter. An iamb is a foot with a da DUM rhythm and pentameter just means there are five of these poetic feet in each line—da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM. So here, the speaker is saying that she was struggling to make her lines fit into the meter she wanted. In trying to stretch out words and syllables to fit the established rhythm, she just made things worse.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet, / Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;"

VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 1, Line 16, Line 19, Line 20, Line 21, Line 22) - An archaic form of "you."

Ill-form'd (Line 1) - Misshapen and incomplete.

Didst (Line 2) - An archaic form of "did."

Thence (Line 3) - An archaic form of "there."

Thee (Line 4, Line 5, Line 9, Line 15, Line 17, Line 24) - An archaic form of "you."

Abroad (Line 4) - Internationally; this an allusion to the fact that Bradstreet's book was published in England while she was living in America.

Raggs (Line 5) - Torn clothing.

Halting (Line 5) - Slow and hesitant.

Trudge (Line 5) - Slow and heavy walking.

Judg (Line 6) - Judge; critique or form an opinion on something.

Thy (Line 7, Line 10, Line 12, Line 13, Line 15, Line 21, Line 22, Line 23) - An archaic form of "your."

Rambling brat (Line 8) - Talkative, annoying, poorly-behaved child.

Visage (Line 10) - Face.

Irksome (Line 10) - Annoying and/or disgusting.

Mine own (Line 11) - My own.

Defects (Line 13) - Imperfections.

Joynts (Line 15) - The joints of the body.

Run'st (Line 16) - Runs.

Hobling (Line 16) - Hobbling—walking or running with difficulty (perhaps a limp).

Meet (Line 16) - Wanted.

Trim (Line 17) - Here trim means to clothe.

Nought (Line 18) - Nothing.

Home-spun Cloth (Line 18) - Material made on a spinning wheel at home.

I' th' house (Line 18) - In the house.

Array (Line 19) - Clothing, dress.

'Mongst (Line 19) - Among.

Vulgars (Line 19) - "Vulgar" means obscene, rude, or ignorant. The speaker here is using such a term to refer to the general public.

Mayst (Line 19) - Archaic form of "may."

Criticks (Line 20) - Critics, people who would judge the speaker's book.

Dost (Line 20) - Archaic form of "do."

Askt (Line 22) - Archaic form of "asked."

Hadst (Line 22) - Archaic form of "had."

Alas (Line 23) - Unfortunately.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Author to her Book" is written in one single block of text, with 24 lines in total. These can be broken into 12 rhyming couplets. Remember, this is a poem in which the author seeks to self-deprecate—to play down her poetic ability (while also, of course, demonstrating this ability at the same time). Having all the text in one big block suggests a certain lack of refinement, as though this is the raw material of poetry that hasn't yet been shaped into recognizable form.

There are some subtle transitions in the poem, however. The first six lines tell the story of how the book was published. Then lines 7 to 18 talk about Bradstreet's attempts to improve the book. Finally, lines 19 through 24 show her letting go of the book—a metaphor for publishing it, and pushing it off to fend for itself in the big bad world.

METER

"The Author to Her Book" is written in heroic couplets. This means the poem consists of rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines, or lines with five metrical feet that each follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da DUM). For example, take line 1:

Thou ill- | form'd off- | spring of | my feeb- | le brain,

Ironically, though the speaker professes in lines 15 and 16 that her ability to handle meter is poor, the poem's meter is remarkably consistent and convincing to the ear—suggesting that the speaker has more talent than she lets on!

On the one hand, iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English poetry—supporting the speaker's suggestion that her book should go and live among "Vulgars" (common folk). But writing metered poetry that flows well and doesn't get in the way of what's being said is difficult—so the ease with which the poem unfolds also demonstrates the poet's metrical skill. Perhaps this is a bit like what people call a "humble brag" nowadays!

RHYME SCHEME

"The Author to Her Book" is written in rhyming couplets:

AABBCC

...and so on. Depending on the definition, this scheme can also be described as heroic couplets because the lines of the poem also conform to iambic pentameter (see the Meter section of this guide for more on that). This is a very old form. That means that, while the couplets here have quite a simple sound, they also place the poem squarely within a poetic tradition, something which the poem seems to argue *against* while perhaps secretly desiring it. There's a tension between what's being expressed and the way in which it's being expressed; that is, the poem demonstrates the author's skill while simultaneously denying that skill.

SPEAKER

It's fair to read the speaker in this poem as Anne Bradstreet herself. There's enough overlap between the content of the poem and what's known about Bradstreet's biography to read her as the "author" mentioned in the poem's title—though, of course, that doesn't mean that the interpretive possibilities end there.

The first six lines follow the story Bradstreet's one published book, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, which was supposedly printed in England without her knowledge by her brother-in-law. The book was very keen to stress that writing poetry hadn't got in the way of the author's domestic duties—raising her children, etc. This points to how unusual it was for a woman to publish a book of poetry in that era, and perhaps this hints at why this poem is so eager to stress that the book doesn't have any real merit; perhaps it's a kind of defense mechanism in a poetry world dominated by men. Bradstreet uses an extended metaphor to position herself as the "feeble brain" behind the "ill-form'd" book, and the poem goes on to try to anticipate criticism of her poetry. This suggests an anxiety about the reception of her work (which, given people are still reading it now, was perhaps unfounded!).

SETTING

"The Author to her Book" doesn't really have a specific setting—the whole poem is a direct address from the author, Bradstreet, to her book, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. The poem is one extended metaphor from start to finish, without much detail in terms of where the poem is set.

That said, there are elements in the poem that give a sense of Bradstreet's life as a Puritan in America (the Puritans were 17th century English Protestants who moved to America in the hope of setting up a better—and more godly—society). The first six lines talk about the publication of Bradstreet's book in England ("abroad"), giving a sense of the Transatlantic division of her life between two countries (her and her family crossed the ocean in 1630, when Bradstreet was 18). The poem also gives a sense of an impoverished way of life, with the references to "home-spun Cloth" and "raggs."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Anne Bradstreet is one of the first published female poets in the English language. The poem is read as autobiographical, with Bradstreet reflecting and commenting on the publication of her one collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. This book was first published in 1650 and showcased Bradstreet's deep and wide-ranging understanding of literature.

At the same time, because publishing *anything* was an extremely unusual activity for a woman, the book also stressed that Bradstreet didn't neglect her womanly duties (childcare and housework) and that her poems were only the "fruit but of some few houres, curtailed from her sleep, and other refreshments." The introduction even stresses how amazed the (presumably male) reader will be that a woman wrote the poems! Perhaps, then, it's understandable that Bradstreet would feel considerable anxiety about her book and its worthiness. She needn't have worried, of course, because her superior work has outlasted most of the male writers of her era. "The Author to Her Book" was written when Bradstreet was contemplating a revision of the above book. Accordingly, it is an instance of reflection in which the poet comes to term with the perceived imperfections of her work.

Bradstreet was not the only Puritan poet, of course (the Puritans were English protestant settlers in America), though she is arguably the most significant. In terms of Puritans living in America, Edward Taylor is the most obvious point of comparison. Indeed, his poem "Huswifery" explores specifically female types of labor as an extended metaphor for his relationship with God (while Bradstreet uses a male activity to explore her relationship with her own creativity). John Milton ("Paradise Lost") and John Dryden are also considered Puritan poets, though they did not immigrate to America. It's also worth considering Bradstreet alongside Emily Dickinson—they are

two of the most important American poets, both writing in a male-dominated literary environment.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Puritans were a group of English Protestants who moved to the New World—America—during the 16th and 17th centuries. Their main aim was to establish a new society founded on Protestant ideals—they disagreed with the religious direction of the Church of England (which was predominantly Catholic). As the name suggests, the Puritans sought to *purify* humankind's relationship with God, believing that it had been corrupted by certain Catholic practices. It's important to note that "Puritan" is a very broad term that covers a wide range of beliefs, some of which are contradictory with one another. Some Puritans advocated for separating from the official Church, while others wanted to stay within its institution.

In 1620, a number of separatists travelled from England to New England in what would become U.S. Known as Pilgrims, they sailed on the famous *Mayflower* and are an important part of the (white) American origin story and folklore. Around a hundred passengers undertook the arduous crossing over the Atlantic, with around half of them surviving to establish a colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Bradstreet travelled with her family in 1630 on the *Arbella*, arriving initially in Salem before settling elsewhere in Massachusetts. Life in the colonies was much tougher than anticipated, with disease and hunger commonplace.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Puritan Experience — A more in-depth look into the Puritan movement. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism)
- Bradstreet's Life Story — A valuable resource on Anne Bradstreet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-bradstreet)
- America's First Poet — An NPR piece about the life and work of Anne Bradstreet. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4616663)
- Homage to Mistress Bradstreet — A poetic tribute to Anne Bradstreet by John Berryman. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48266/homage-to-mistress-bradstreet)
- The Book in Question — Read the full text of Anne Bradstreet's collection of poetry (the book referred to in this poem), "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America." (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A77237.0001.001?view=toc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ANNE BRADSTREET POEMS

- To My Dear and Loving Husband

HOW TO CITE

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