

## “O Heal My Soul”

### Health and Healing in Anne Bradstreet’s Poetry

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**Abstract.** The main concern of this article is a close study of Anne Bradstreet’s recurrent focus in her poetry on health and healing in the physical and spiritual sense. For the Puritans in Bradstreet’s colonial New England, physical afflictions meant God’s trials closely associated with guilt and moral depravity. On the other hand, good health was commonly considered to be an indication of spiritual purity and redemption from sinfulness. It was therefore interpreted as a reward from God. In this regard, Bradstreet’s poetry, which embodies various allusions and explicit evidence, recurrently gestures to this fundamental Puritan dichotomy of illness and wellness.

**Keywords:** Anne Bradstreet, health and healing, spiritual healing, Puritanism, Puritan spirituality, colonial Puritanism, New England Puritans

In her poem “For Deliverance from A Fever” (p. 247), Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) describes how she desperately cried out to God for redemption and her recovery of health. She had been suffering from high fever; she says, as her “burning flesh in sweat did boil” (*line 6*), she implored to God in pain: “O heal my soul” (*line 18*). Considered within the broader cultural and spiritual context of early Puritanism and the Puritan idea of the self in colonial New England (Bercovitch 1-35 in particular), Bradstreet’s call upon God for healing reiterates the common Puritan perception of God as the health-giver and the healer. For the Puritan mind, health and spirituality were closely interrelated. Physical afflictions such as an illness or a disease were regarded as “life’s trials” (Doriani 59) and “chastisement from God” (Doriani 60) or “God’s dispensations” (Hammond 13). On the other hand, well-being and recovery from an affliction was understood as the healing effects of faith and supplication, immaculate spirituality, and both bodily and spiritual self-discipline in view of worldly temptations and sinfulness. In other words, in Puritan faith, afflictions and illnesses were attributed to one’s sinful self and, therefore, given by God as chastisement. As for well-being, it was related to one’s piety and spiritual purity. Moreover, it was considered to be a reward from God, for which gratitude was expressed through prayer and absolute supplication to God. This dual vision of wellness is a recurrent theme in Bradstreet and also in the poetry of her contemporaries, especially Edward Taylor and Michael Wigglesworth.

Historically, Bradstreet made her literary *début* in 1650 with the publication of her book of poetry, metaphorically entitled *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America* and cited briefly ever after as *The Tenth Muse*. Written within a Puritan social and cultural context, Bradstreet's poetry embodies a vast range of topicality, fundamentally combining early New England Puritan intellectualism and an unusual display of female sensitivity that reveals her own feminine self and challenges dominant Puritan patriarchy. As the first woman poet in American literature, she has never lost her literary popularity for study and research. In this regard one may recall Rosamond Rosenmeier's view that "each age has discovered its own Anne Bradstreet" (xi). Also relevant is Jane D. Eberwein's statement that "each generation constructs its own portrait" of Bradstreet ("Anne Bradstreet" 165). Moreover, besides her Puritan and pious self, she has also come to be recognized as a romantic worldly self, a feminist, a liberated intellectual, a public instructor, a historian-poet, a progressive mind, and a self-searching individual. For her, as a woman poet, the writing of poetry was a serious literary interest and indeed a career rather than a mere feminine pastime in an otherwise anti-poetical social milieu of colonial Puritan New England. Therefore, considered within the history of poetry in America, she has been eulogized deservedly as the "historically, metaphorically, and even biologically mother of American poetry" (Eberwein, "Anne Bradstreet" 161).

Bradstreet's poetry with its range of thematic variety is predominantly informed by Puritan spirituality and Biblical acculturation while at the same time it is extensively concerned with worldly sensibilities and issues. Indeed, as Beth Doriani has pointed out by referring to the eminent Bradstreet scholar Robert Daly,

Bradstreet remained faithful to her tradition in that she celebrated the sensible world while consistently ascending to a celebration of its Creator through her contemplation of the world (52).

In other words, the dichotomy of the soul and the flesh is levelled out in her poetry and constitutes a discourse which recurrently reveals a close relationship and ongoing interaction between the metaphysics of the soul and the worldliness of the flesh. One most explicit projection of this relationship and interaction in her poetry is her constant invocation of God for help and redemption in overcoming her afflictions whether physical or psychological (Bradstreet, especially pp. 222-23, 240-45, 247-49). At this point, it would be a useful framework of reference to dwell briefly on the Puritan metaphysics of faith and its relationship with good health. Then, the question of how she privileges an inalienable relationship between spirituality and healing or, more broadly, between faith and good health can be answered through references to her poetry. In fact, what Brett Hendrickson has stated in a totally different context seems relevant to our point:

European colonizers on both the Atlantic seaboard and in what is now the U.S. Southwest drew on explicit Christian practices and beliefs about healing as well as theological assumptions about health and healing (348).

In the Puritan culture of colonial New England, religion and medicine were understood as inalienable from each other; in other words, faith and physical as well as spiritual good health were regarded as closely interrelated. For

consolation, relief, endurance, and spiritual sustenance in overcoming illnesses, afflictions, and all sorts of infirmities, Puritans completely relied on their faith and, in a mood of profound spirituality, prayed and implored to God as the health-giver and the healer. Accordingly, as Jean Marie Lutes has argued, in Puritan New England,

the lines between folk belief, religious ritual, and scientific endeavor were far from impermeable. [...] Ministers, as members of a privileged group of educated men, often served double duty as doctors and preachers (314).

Evidently, for the Puritan mind, the indisputable instances of the interaction of religion and medicine or religious propagation and medical healing were to be seen in the healing miracles performed by Christ and his apostles (*King James Version*, Matt. 4.23-4, 8.2 and 5-16, and 9.20-2; Luke 4.33-6 and 38-40, 5.12-5 and 18-25; Acts 9.33-4 and 14.8-10; Jas 5.13-6). In Matt. 4.23, for example, Christ is depicted as performing his miracles of "healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people," while at the same time he continues to teach and preach "the gospel of [God's] kingdom." Furthermore, upon Christ's healing miracles, there were

brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them" (Matt.4.24).

Through his miracles Christ demonstrated that health and healing could be attained and sustained both physically and spiritually and that spiritual purity is a state of wellness. Similarly, it was a common conviction among the Puritans of colonial New England that all diseases and afflictions could be remedied through an unwavering devotion to Christ and by full submission to God's grace and that spiritual purity was essential for the maintenance of a healthy life. Both Bradstreet and her contemporaries voiced all these fundamental Puritan convictions and dogmas in their writings. For instance, Edward Taylor emphasizes how spiritual purity and healing is attained through absolute love for Christ; in his poem "Christ's Reply" (p. 51), Christ offers grace and mercy to the faithful who are afflicted and traumatized by their sinfulness and despair:

If that you stick unto my Cause,  
Opposing whom oppose my Laws,  
I am your own, and you are mine.  
The weary Soule I will refresh,  
And Ease him of his heaviness.  
[...]  
I will you comfort sweet extend.  
[...]  
To him that smiteth hip and thigh  
My foes as his: Walks warily,  
I'll give him Grace: he'st give me praise. (51)

Indeed, throughout his poetry, especially both in "Gods Determinations" (pp. 31-109) and in "Meditations" (pp. 123-79), Taylor strongly reiterates his "ardor of [...] love for Christ" (Johnson 16), which he expresses in a "homeroetic" mode adapted from secular love poetry and employed for a spiritual end (Johnson 16-

7). For him, spiritual agony and despair is a state of illness and undermines physical and spiritual health. Therefore, he further implies, without complete submission to Christ, and because of indulgence in worldliness and sinfulness, man fails to maintain good health and loses his spiritual purity, as indicated metaphorically in “The Effects of Man’s Apostacy” (pp. 34-5):

While man unmarr’d abode, his Spirits all  
 In Vivid hue were active in their hall,  
 This spotless Body; here and there mentain  
 Their traffick for the Universall gain,  
 Till Sin Beat up for Volunteers. Whence came  
 A thousand Griefs attending on the same.  
 Which march in ranck and file, proceed to make  
 A Battery, and the fort of Life to take. (34)

Moreover, for Taylor, due to sinfulness and, indeed, moral corruption, man is traumatized by agonies and becomes physically and spiritually sick:

Yet this he easily feels, he liveth in  
 A dying Life, and Living Death by Sin. (35)

In fact, what has been termed “soul loss” in the “soul retrieval therapy” today (Hendrickson 347) perfectly corresponds to the Puritan idea of sinfulness and its consequent effect, which is the loss of health. As a leading voice for soul-retrieval therapy in modern medicine, Hendrickson states that

the cause of much suffering and illness is ‘soul loss’ caused by traumatic events that fracture the soul and force parts of it out of the body. The resulting lack of wholeness creates imbalances that can be both psychologically and physically debilitating (347).

As regards this interrelationship of physicality and spirituality, Philippa Koch stresses in her comments on the Puritan minister Cotton Mather’s medical knowledge that

like most Christians of his generation, he [Cotton Mather] found the origins of sickness in the original sin of Adam and Eve. [...] [For him] sickness was a symptom and reminder of human weakness and transience and an invaluable opportunity to encourage sufferers to reflect on their spiritual state and God’s providential promise of salvation. By repenting and turning to God, sinners could heal their souls (559).

Preceding Mather a generation earlier, Bradstreet also had clearly stressed the same idea through her allegorical figure “Childhood” (pp. 52-5) in her poem “Of the Four Ages of Man” (pp. 50-64). For her, the human body was, owing to the original sin of Adam and Eve, subject to all kinds of sinfulness and sickness, which inevitably led to the loss of spiritual purity:

But yet let me relate before I go  
 The sins and dangers I am subject to.  
 Stained from birth with Adam’s sinful fact,  
 Thence I began to sin as soon as act.  
 [...]  
 As many are my sins, so dangers too;  
 For sin brings sorrow, sickness, death, and woe (*lines 120-23 and 130-31*).

It was within the context of all this Puritan culture of spirituality and physical well-being that Bradstreet's perspective of the interrelationship of faith and health or, more broadly, of religion and medicine, was shaped. Like her fellow Puritans she was convinced that poor health was a physical symptom of sinfulness. On the other hand, she also shared the common Puritan belief that, for somatic and spiritual healing, redemption from one's sins was of paramount importance; accordingly, redemption could only be attained through repentance, prayer, and absolute submission to God. Therefore, in her poetry, she recurrently emphasizes how she was spiritually and physically healed from her illnesses and traumas through full spiritual self-abandonment to God's love and mercy. For instance, her poem "From Another Sore Fit" (p. 248), among others, is a relevant example in this regard for illustration:

In my distress I sought the Lord  
When naught on earth could comfort give,  
And when my soul these things abhorred,  
Then, Lord, Thou said'st unto me, "Live."  
Thou knowest the sorrows that I felt;  
My plaints and groans were heard of Thee,  
And how in sweat I seemed to melt  
Thou help'st and Thou regardest me.

[...]

My heart I wholly give to Thee;  
O make it fruitful, faithful Lord.  
My life shall dedicated be

To praise in thought, in deed, in word (*lines 2-9 and 18-21*).

Evidently Bradstreet's colonial life under Puritan austerity and patriarchy was barely endurable owing to the harsh physical, economic, and social circumstances of her time. While trying with her family, like all other early Puritan colonists, to build up a safe and prosperous life in the wilderness of colonial New England, she inevitably faced a host of traumatic challenges. Recurrent illnesses, untimely death of her children and grandchildren, the destruction by fire of the family house, and days of depressing loneliness due to her husband's frequent absence on business, obviously had a traumatic impact on her private life. Indeed she extensively voices her physical and spiritual agonies and traumas through her poetry, which contains a great deal of autobiographical as well as confessional details and becomes a powerful expression of gender identity *vis-à-vis* dominant Puritan patriarchy. Therefore, throughout her poetry with an autobiographical and confessional dimension (for example, pp. 14-7, 225-30, 247-49, 265-68), one always senses an undercurrent of tension displaying an internalized and unabated conflict between the Puritan doctrinal values and way of life on the one hand and her liberal and feminine self on the other (Hammond 12). In this regard, her poetry can be read as the portrayal of what Hammond somewhat categorically calls "a decidedly un-Puritan self who reveals unusual difficulties in adapting to the demands of her faith and her society" (11). So, in order to overcome her traumas and constantly recurring afflictions, Bradstreet turned to poetry and, by pouring out her agonies into her poetry, used it as a healing or, in Robert Daly's term, "salvific" practice (136). In other words, in poetry she definitely discovered a comforting and healing consolation for her illnesses and traumatic experiences.

For her, besides devoted piety and absolute supplication to God's mercy, one's creative practice of art, including poetry, has a healing effect on one's afflicted body and brain. She clearly emphasizes this conviction of hers in "The Prologue" (pp. 15-17), which can also be considered to be her poem of *apologia* in the Renaissance humanistic tradition for her book of poetry *The Tenth Muse* against possible patriarchal and anti-feminist attacks on her as a poet. By giving the example of the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.), whom she describes as "that fluent sweet tongued Greek" (line 21), she self-confidently asserts the healing effects of art:

By art he gladly found what he did seek,  
A full requittal of his striving pain.  
Art can do much [...] (lines 23-5).

Moreover, in addition to the healing power of poetry, she found healing also in her love of nature. Doctrinally, the common Puritan attitude towards the physical and human world was one of ambivalence. On the one hand, as can be seen in the poetry of Wigglesworth (especially "The Day of Doom") and Taylor, the Puritans abhorred the pleasures and comforts of this world and constantly tried to refrain from them in order to avoid sinfulness and spiritual contamination. Yet, on the other, with a sense of what one may aptly term Puritan transcendentalism, they also regarded the physical world as a revelation of God's own power and love. In other words, for them, God was immanent in the physical world, and the beauty of nature was a transcendental reflection of divine beauty that could be best appreciated through contemplation, which also has a healing effect on the troubled mind or traumatized soul. Although in various poems as, for example, in "The Flesh and the Spirit" (pp. 215-18), "The Vanity of All Wordly Things" (pp. 219-20), "Meditations" (pp. 251-53), and "As Weary Pilgrim" (pp. 294-95), Bradstreet voices the Puritan prohibition of wordliness and warns against sinfulness, it is the healing and transcendental idea of the natural world that she brings to the fore in her "Contemplations" (pp. 204-14) with an explicit sense of romanticism. For instance, in the opening section of the poem, she celebrates the scenic beauty of the New England landscape in autumn and feels spiritually uplifted ("rapt") and healed:

Some time now past in the autumnal tide,  
When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,  
The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,  
Where gilded o'er by his rich golden head.  
Their leaves and fruits seemed painted, but was true,  
Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hue;  
Rapt were my senses at this delectable view (lines 2-8).

Indeed, to get over her afflictions and spiritually traumatized moments, she turns to nature for God's immanent presence and, thereby, through contemplation and self-reflection, experiences the impact of spiritual healing and well-being.

To conclude, in her life Bradstreet constantly suffered from physical and spiritual as well as patriarchal and doctrinal traumas. Therefore, she was indefatigably struggling for both physical and spiritual healthiness. However, as can be understood from her 1669 poem "As Weary Pilgrim" (pp.294-95), she began towards the end of her life to consider herself as a "weary pilgrim" (line 1)

in this world and longed for death as a complete release from agonies and as a means for an eternal reunion with God. As a devoted Puritan, who cherished a transcendent vision of life in this world, she believed she would acquire through death not only a blessed deliverance from an unhappy earthly life of pain, doubt, fear, and all kinds of affliction but also an unadulterated state of well-being in union with God.

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