

"Old Age"

By Anne Bradstreet

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup
by Staff and Research Assistants at The University of Virginia*

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SEVERAL
POEMS

Compiled with great variety of Wit and
Learning, full of Delight;
Wherein especially is contained a compleat
Discourse, and Description of
The Four { ELEMENTS
CONSTITUTIONS,
AGES of Man,
SEASONS of the Year.
Together with an exact Epitome of
the three first *Monarchyes*
Viz, The { ASSYRIAN,
PERSIAN,
GRECIAN.

*And beginning of the Romane Common-wealth
to the end of their last King:*
With diverse other pleasant & serious *Poems* ,
By a Gentlewoman in *New-England* .
*The second Edition, Corrected by the Author,
and enlarged by an Addition of several other
Poems found amongst her Papers
after her Death.*

Boston , Printed by *John Foster* , 1678.

Old Age, ^{title}

1 What you have been, ev'n such have I before,
2 And all you say, say I, and something more;

3 Babes innocence, Youths wildness I have seen,
4 And in perplexed Middle-age have bin,
5 Sicknesse, dangers, and anxieties have past,
6 And on this Stage am come to act my last.
7 I have bin young, and strong, ad wise as you,
8 But now, *Bis pueri senes* , ^{bis} , is too true;
9 In every Age i've found much vanitie,
10 An end of all perfection now I see.
11 It's not my valour, honour, nor my gold,
12 My ruin'd house, now fallin can uphold;
13 It's not my Learning, Rhetorick, wit so large,
14 Now hath the power, Deaths Warfare, to discharge;
15 It's not my goodly house, nor bed of down,
16 That can refresh, or ease, if Conscience frown;
17 Nor from alliance now can I have hope,
18 But what I have done wel, that is my prop;
19 He that in youth is godly, wise, and sage,
20 Provides a staffe for to support his age.
21 Great mutations, some joyful, and some sad,
22 In this short Pilgrimage, ^{pilgrimage} I oft have had;
23 Sometimes the Heavens with plenty smil'd on me,
24 Sometimes again, rain'd al adversity;
25 Sometimes in honour, sometimes in disgrace,
26 Sometimes an abject, then again in place,
27 Such private changes oft mine eyes have seen
28 In various times of state i've also been.
29 I've seen a Kingdom flourish like a tree,
30 When it was rul'd by that Celestial she, ^{she};
31 And like a Cedar, others so surmount,
32 That but for shrubs they did themselves account;

33 Then saw I *France* , and *Holland* sav'd, *Cales* won,
34 And *Philip* , and *Albertus* , half undone, ^{undone};
35 I saw all peace at home, terror to foes,

36 But ah, I saw at last those eyes to close:
37 And then, me thought, the world at noon grew dark,
38 When it had lost that radiant Sun-like spark,
39 In midst of greifs, I saw some hopes revive,
40 (For 'twas our hopes then kept our hearts alive)
41 I saw hopes dasht, our fwwardnesse was shent,
42 And silenc'd we, by Act of Parliament,^{act}.
43 I've seen from *Rome*, an excerable thing,
44 A plot to blow up Nobles, and their King,^{plot};
45 I've seen signes at *Ree*,^{Ree}, and *Cades*,ⁿ⁰⁰⁷ crost,
46 And poor *Palatinate* for ever lost.
47 I've seen a Prince, to live on onthers lands,^{exile},
48 A Royal one, by almes from Subjects hands,
49 I've seen base men, advanc'd to great degree,
50 And worthy ones, put to extremity:
51 But not their Princes love, nor state so high;
52 could once reverse, their shameful destiny.
53 I've seen one stab'd, another loose his head,^{head};
54 And others sly their Country, through their dread.

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55 It've seen, and so have ye, for 'tis but late,
56 The desolation, of a goodly State.
57 Plotted and acted, so that none can tell,
58 Who gave the counsel, but the Prince of hell.
59 I've seen a land unmoulded with great paine.
60 But yet may live, to see'd made up again:
61 I've seen it shaken, rent, and soak'd in blood,^{blood},

The Irish Rebellion of 1641, which began as an attempted coup d'etat by Irish Catholic gentry who tried to seize control of the English administration in Ireland to force concessions of Catholics. The rebellion broke out October 1641 and was followed by several months of violent chaos. Source: Wikipedia

62 But out of troubles, ye may see much good,
63 These are no old weives tales, but this is truth;
64 We old men love to tell, what's done in youth.
65 But I returne, from whence I stept awry,
66 My memory is shott, and braine is dry.
67 My Almond-tree (gray haire) doth flourish now,
68 And back, once straight, begins apace to bow.
69 My grinders now are few, my sight doth faile
70 My skin is wrinkled, and my cheeks are pale.
71 No more rejoyce, at musickes pleasant noyce,
72 But do awake, at the cocks clanging voyce.
73 I cannot scent, savours of pleasant meat,

74 Nor sapors, ^{sapors} find, in what I drink or eat.
75 My hands and armes, once strong, have lost their might,
76 I cannot labour, nor I cannot fight:

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77 My comely legs, as nimble as the Roe, ^{roe} ,
78 Now stiffe and numb, can hardly creep or go.
79 My heart sometimes as fierce, as Lion hold,
80 Now trembling, and fearful, sad, and cold;
81 My golden Bowl, and silver Cord, e're long,
82 Shal both be broke, by wracking death so strong;
83 I then shal go, whence I shal come no more,
84 Sons, Nephews, leave, my death for to deplore;
85 In pleasures, and in labours, I have found.
86 That earth can give no consolation found.
87 To grease, to rich, to poore, to young, or old,
88 To mean, to noble, fearful, or to bold:
89 From King to begger, all degrees shal finde
90 But vanity, vexation of the minde;
91 Yea knowing much, the pleasant'st life of all,
92 Hath yet amongst that sweet some bitter gall.
93 Though reading others Works, doth much refresh,
94 Yet studying much, brings wearinesse to th' flesh:
95 My studies, labours, readings, all are done,
96 And my last period now e'n almost run;
97 Corruption, my Father, I do call,
98 Mother, and sisters both; the worms, that crawl,
99 In my dark house, such kindred I have store,
100 There, I shal rest, til heavens shal be no more;
101 And when this flesh that rot, and be consum'd,
102 This body, by this soul, shal be assum'd;
103 And I shal see, with these same very eyes,
104 My strong Redeemer, comming in the skies;
105 Triumph I shal, o're Sin, o're Death, o're Hel,
106 And in that hope, I bid you all farewell.

Footnotes

- title The first section of the Tenth Muse includes four long poems known as the quaternions. These are the "Four Elements", "The Four Humors of Man", "The Four Ages of Man", and "The Four Seasons." Each poem consists of a series of orations with "Old Age" being the fourth portion of the poem "The Four Ages of Man" preceded by "Childhood", "Youth", and "Middle Age" respectively. Source: Poetry Foundation
- bis Latin phrase meaning "old men are twice boys." Source: Encyclopedia Co. UK
- pilgrimage Although Bradstreet is probably using Pilgrimage as a metaphor to mean the narrator's life time, it could also be possible that she is referring to her move from England to the New England Colonies to support the Puritan cause. The ship by which she travelled docked at Salem, Massachusetts on July 22, 1630. Source: Poetry Foundation
- she Queen Elizabeth
- undone Most likely this is referencing the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 during which Phillip II was the ruler of Spain. He organized a huge naval expedition against Protestant England in 1588 which turned out unsuccessful and gave England a great advantage. The Spanish Armada anchored before Calais, a port city in Northern France. The vast success of Queen Elizabeth may perhaps be said to have "undone" Philip and Albertus, who was made Governor of Netherlands by Phillip II of Spain. Source: Google Books, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse* ; Wikipedia
- act In progress.
- plot The Gunpowder Plot also known as the Gunpowder Treason Plot or the Jesuit Treason, was a failed assassination attempt against King James I of England by a group of English Catholics led by Robert Catesby. The plan was to blow up the house lord during the State Opening of England's Parliament on November 5, 1605. Source: Wikipedia
- Ree Sent by King Charles I, George Villiers was the 1st Duke of Buckingham and the leader of the fleet that made an unsuccessful attempt to take the Isle de Rhe in front of La Rochelle in 1627. Source: Wikipedia
- n007 Refers to the failure of a naval expedition under the command of Sir Edward Cecil, an English military commander who sailed in 1625 to capture some Spanish treasure ships in the Bay of Cadiz. Source: Google Books, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*.
- exile The elector of Palatinate, Frederick V, spent the rest of his life in exile. Source: Wikipedia
- head King Charles I who was beheaded after 59 commissioners signed his death warrant after his trial on January 1649 proceeding the English Civil War. Source: Wikipedia
- savors Taste. Source: Oxford English Dictionary
- roe The roe deer.