POPULAR PURITAN POETRY

The Puritans were too preoccupied with the establishment of the ideal Christian society in the New World wilderness to have time for such "unreal" literary forms as drama and fiction. But for poetry they had a genuine fondness, perhaps because they could place it in the service of their and the community's struggle in this life to gain entry into the next. Thus poetry figured importantly in early life in education for the young, in mid-life in singing psalms at church services, and at the end of life in observances and rituals for the dead.

The first book published in America—in 1640—was in effect a book of poetry, designed to be sung at church services: *The Whole Book of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Meter.* The book was commonly called *The Bay Psalm Book.* Psalm singing by the congregation came in with the Reformation, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony early decided to create its own version of the psalms, rendering them as close as possible to the original Hebrew in which they were written, and at the same time adapting them to be sung. The task was undertaken by several of the most distinguished divines of the Bay colony, including Increase Mather and John Eliot. The inversions of syntactic structures that jar the modern ear ("The Lord to me a shepherd is") serve to fit the words to the meters and rhythms of the tunes used in the Puritan services.

Much New England poetry was preserved by Nathaniel Morton (1613–1686) in his history of New England, *New England's Memorial* (1669). In writing his history, Morton quoted verbatim long passages from his Uncle William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation.* When the Bradford manuscript came to light in 1855, Morton's book faded in importance. But as a ready source for many examples of early New England poetry, especially memorials, threnodies, and epitaphs written for eminent Puritan citizens when they died, Morton's work is invaluable. By browsing in his book we discover the truth of what Moses Coit Tyler remarked: "It is an extraordinary fact about these grave and substantial men of New England . . . that they all had a lurking propensity to write what they sincerely believed to be poetry. . . ." It was the extraordinary occasion of death that inspired and emboldened these closet poets to publish, unashamedly, their verses to the world.

If poetry could assist in salvation, and help in the experience of death, it could also serve education, largely, perhaps, because of its usefulness as a memory aid. In studying the alphabet, the Puritan child chanted "In Adam's fall/We sinned all," learning thus not only the letter A but also an important point of religious doctrine. *The New England Primer,* containing this and other similar verses aimed at simultaneous education and indoctrination, appeared around 1683, and in all some 5,000,000 copies bearing identical mnemonic devices and dogmas were circulated. Such a book so widely read was a powerful force in shaping a cohesive culture with a common moral and religious outlook.

ADDITIONAL READING

Moses Coit Tyler, "New England: The Verse Writers," *A History of American Literature, 1607–1765,* 1878; Samuel Marion Tucker, "The Beginnings of Verse, 1610–1808," *The Cambridge History of American Literature,* Vol. 1, 1917; Zoltán Haraszti, *The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book,* 1956.

TEXTS

The Bay Psalm Book: A Facsimile Reprint of the First Edition of 1640, ed. Zoltán Haraszti, 1956; Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial: or, A Brief Relation of the Providence of God manifested to the Planters of New England in America: with Special Reference to the First Colony Thereof, Called New Plymouth*, 1669, rpt. 1855; *The New England Primer*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 1727, 1897, rpt. 1962. Typography, punctuation, spelling, and usage have been changed to conform with contemporary English and modern printing practices.

from The Bay Psalm Book (1640)

Psalm 8

O Lord our God in all the earth
how's Thy name wondrous great,
Who hast Thy glorious majesty
above the heavens set.
Out of the mouths of sucking babes
Thy strength Thou didst ordain,
That Thou mightst still the enemy,
and them that Thee disdain.
When I Thy finger's work, Thy Heavens,
the moon and stars consider,
Which Thou hast set: What's wretched man
that Thou dost him remember?
Or what's the Son of Man, that thus
Him visited Thou hast?
For next to angels, Thou hast him
a little lower placed,
And hast with glory crowned him,
and comely majesty:
And on Thy works hast given him
lordly authority.
All hast Thou put under his feet;
all sheep and oxen, yea,
And beasts of field, fowls of the air,
and fishes of the sea,
And all that pass through paths of seas.
O Jehovah our Lord,
How wondrously-magnificent
is Thy name through the world?

Psalm 23

The Lord to me a shepherd is,
want therefore shall not I.
He in the folds of tender grass,
doth cause me down to lie.

To waters calm me gently leads,
restore my soul doth He;
He doth in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake lead me.
Yea though in valley of death's shade
I walk, none ill I'll fear,
Because Thou art with me; Thy rod
and staff my comfort are.
For me a table Thou hast spread,
in presence of my foes.
Thou dost anoint my head with oil;
my cup it overflows.
Goodness and mercy surely shall
all my days follow me;
And in the Lord's house I shall dwell
so long as days shall be.