

Understanding Puritan Womanhood in Feminist America

Leora Hall

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Historians have made a great attempt in the past fifty years of colonial American historiography to understand the mind of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Puritan woman in America. Who was she? What did she want? How did she think of herself and her role? How did she view men? How did men view her? Since the surge of feminism in the 1960s, several answers have been offered to these questions, primarily among female historians. However, feminist historiography revises the Puritan woman's experience by placing it under the social construct of patriarchy. Feminism argues that male authority—what they term the patriarchy—has suppressed women throughout history. Guided by this tenet, scholars in the feminist school define early American history in terms of either women's suppression or women's liberation, as they do with every era of history. Because Puritan women focused their primary attentions in the domestic sphere, many feminist scholars deduce that such women must have empowered themselves in other outlets or endured repressive male authority. Some historians go so far as to say that Puritanism laid the foundation for nineteenth-century feminism in America.

The feminist perspective is becoming the most common historical interpretation of the Puritan woman's experience, coinciding with the increasing popularity of women's studies and gender history. Ann-Louise Shapiro states that one of the tenets of feminist historiography is "to theorize the importance of differences in the past, and to write its history." One significant problem with this a priori approach of "insist[ing] upon the feminine focus" is running "the risk of narrowing and distorting the full cultural and autobiographical significance" of—not only the poetry and prose of well-documented women like Anne Bradstreet—but also of many other obscure or overlooked accounts of the Puritans. In many instances, the feminist interpretation contradicts the Puritan woman's genuine experience. In terms of broad Puritan studies, Francis Bremer notes that many in the field of history have been negligent,

Intellectual history in general and religious history in particular, are still pursued by researchers in divinity schools and literature departments, but less commonly in history departments. Even those engaged in recent public debates over the role of religion in U.S. life and government neglect the study of the Puritan past that is so relevant to these issues.

Many misunderstandings remain in broad Puritan studies, and

more research needs to be done in the narrower study of Puritan women in seventeenth and eighteenth century America. This paper intends to show that Puritan women enjoyed their roles, as wives, mothers and homemakers, and they were not chained to these roles by patriarchal oppression. Puritan women did not conceive of their roles as imprisoning; androgynous roles and identities did not appeal to them as it has in a post-1960s American culture. Contrary to what many scholars have argued, most Puritan women were content, fulfilled and found significant purpose in what has been termed “traditional women’s roles.” Second to serving Christ, a woman committed to a husband—both her equal in personhood and called to a man’s unique role as leader, protector and provider. She also considered raising children a privilege and a joyous co-labor between the wife and husband. The Puritan woman also incorporated her skills in the home (praised in passages such as Proverbs 31) and in some instances—remarkably during the time period—education and writing poetry.

An accurate historical understanding of Puritan womanhood is essential to history, and America’s in particular. Without understanding Puritan women, America loses a costly awareness of its heritage as their descendents. As one historian stated, “Without some understanding of Puritanism, it may safely be said, there is no understanding of America.” The first established European-American women have significant messages and a defined legacy to give their descendents. Rewriting Puritan history endangers the worthy pursuit of discerning their true legacy.

Primary sources are most helpful in understanding the thoughts of women such as Anne Bradstreet, Sarah Goodhue and Margaret Winthrop. Though the limitation of primary sources is unfortunate, historians Douglas Wilson and Edmund Morgan argue that that these women were representatives of the Puritan woman’s experience. The fullest accounts written from the female perspective are by women who delighted in their husbands, children and God. Thus these accounts represent the Puritan women whose voices are in the past. In its historical context, the Puritan mindset is fundamentally different from the modern, secular mindset. As J.I. Packer has argued, Puritanism is a worldview, a “total Christian philosophy” strongly founded in the Protestant Scriptures and the Reformed doctrines and confessions. One need only read part of a Puritan text to discern their commitment to reading, writing and internalizing Scripture. The advance of social history has actually undermined this aspect of Puritanism as a total Christian philosophy, passing over many important texts fundamental to Puritan thinking and living. As David Hall points out, seminary historians are the ones who have grasped theology “as a system of interrelated parts,” the importance of creeds and confessions in Puritanism, and the centrality of “that great storehouse of ideas, the Bible.” “According to this point of view,” he writes, “any seventeenth century text is

situated in a multi-layered field of reference.” With those important texts, there are adequate resources that clearly articulate the Puritan mindset, both male and female.

While it cannot be addressed fully in the confines of this paper, it must be mentioned that the widespread image of the killjoy Puritan is an inaccurate one. There may have been a handful of Puritans on that extreme, but historians such as Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan and Leland Ryken have been debunking this common myth over the past century. For example, Ryken writes that “The Puritans dressed according to the fashions of their class and time,” with a full array of colors. They enjoyed various activities such as “hunting, fishing, a form of football, bowling, reading, music, swimming, skating and archery.” C.S. Lewis said the early Puritans were “young, fierce, progressive intellectuals, very fashionable and up-to-date.” Far from being legalistic and emotionless, the Puritans enjoyed their Christian liberties, reveled in the wonders of life and were passionately expressive in their relationships, often with a poetic poignancy. Puritan husbands and wives were the most unabashed in their affection for each other. One of the most famous expressions of marital love—in a “supremely happy marriage” that most historians admit —Anne Bradstreet wrote to her husband, Simon,

My head, my heart, mine Eyes, my life, nay more,/My joy, my
Magazine of earthly store,/If two be one, as surely thou and I/
How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lye?...Within the Cancer
of my glowing breast/The welcome house of him my dearest
guest/Wherever, ever stay, and go not thence/Till natures sad
decree shall call thee hence;/Flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone/I
here, thou there, yet both but one.

She signed her love poems to Simon “Thy loving Love and Dearest Dear, At home, abroad, and every where.” These are the words of a wife passionately in love with her husband; with longing, joy and admiration, Bradstreet pens these lines of poetry without intending the perusal of outside readers. This is only a sampling of the many lines of poetry Bradstreet devoted to her husband. Such passages provide a sense of the real vitality that characterized their marriage, a vitality that—as will be discussed throughout this paper—was representative of the Puritan woman’s experience, not anomalous. Puritans strived to exemplify their theology of marriage in practice. A fundamental concept to the Puritans’ understanding and exercise of marriage is the Biblical concept of covenant love.

The Puritans believed that God ordained marriage, witnessing the establishment of a covenant wherein both husband and wife committed to loving and remaining faithful to one another for life. God united Adam and Eve

as husband and wife at creation, sanctioning marriage and commanding them to “be fruitful and multiply.” Bradstreet directly quotes Genesis 2:23, after God created Eve and gave her to Adam: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.” Bradstreet describes the union with her husband as spiritual and physical, in the following verse of Genesis 2: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Marriage as a creation ordinance and the union of man and woman both physically and spiritually is universal in Puritan theology. Laurel Ulrich writes, “The role of consort was based on a doctrine of creation which stressed the equality of men and women, an ideal of marriage which transcended legal formulations, and a concept of love which was spiritual, yet fully sexual.”

The Puritans wrote that those who speak “reproachfully of it [marriage] do both impeach God’s Wisdom and Truth.” Unlike the Catholics, the Puritans thought of marriage and sexuality therein to be holy, though they did not consider it a sacrament. Rather, marriage was a solemn obligation and joyous privilege, wherein “If husband and wife failed to love each other above all the world, they not only wronged each other, they disobeyed God.” Throughout Scripture, there are more details given on the specific commands, blessings and practical applications for husbands and wives, as in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, Song of Songs, 1 Peter 3, Titus 2, Proverbs 5 and 1 Corinthians 7. In these passages, the husband is called to “love his wife,” even “as his own body,” to “rejoice in the wife of his youth.” The wife is instructed to “respect” her husband and to “submit to him.” Conscious of these commands, Puritans were articulate and detailed concerning how husbands and wives were supposed to treat one another, with affectionate love and kindness as the basis of all thoughts, actions and words. Sources evidence what Edmund S. Morgan stated, “all good Puritans tried to exemplify them [marital duties] in their daily lives.”

For example, Samuel Sewall explained the sweetness and depth of their attitude; romantic emotions are “Sugar to sweeten every addition to married life but not an essential part of it. Love was Condition in the married Relation.” In other words, ideally a man and woman married each other with a mutual affectionate love, but a marriage covenant went deeper than mere emotion. Puritans considered marriage a God-given privilege and duty; the husband and wife were called to love each other as an act of the will when—as sinful humans—their natures inclined toward selfishness and capriciousness. Benjamin Wadsworth exhorts the husband, “The Great God commands thee to love her. How vile then are those who don’t love their wives.” Thus mechanical marriages were not the goal, but a lapse in emotional intensity should not weaken the stability of a marriage or determine its authenticity.

However, the Puritans were not bashful in expressing their passions

and affections for their spouses. John and Margaret Winthrop serve as great examples of expressive devotion in the numerous love letters that they exchanged. The affection in the following excerpt from Margaret to her husband needs no elaboration:

My most sweet husband,—How dearly welcome thy kind letter was to me, I am not able to express. The sweetness of it did much refresh me. What can be more pleasing to a wife, than to hear of the welfare of her best beloved, and how he is pleased with her poor endeavors! I blush to hear myself commended, knowing my own wants. But it is your love that conceives the best, and makes all things seem better than they are. I wish that I may be always pleasing to thee...

In “A Valedictory and Monitory Writing” to her husband and children before her death, Sarah Goodhue wrote “A tender-hearted, affectionate and entire loving husband thou hast been to me in several ways...In all my burthens thou hast willingly with me sympathized, and cheerfully thou hast helped me bear them...” She goes on to reminisce about the twenty years of their marriage, how her husband promoted her good spiritually, emotionally and physically. As is the pattern among many Puritan women when they talk of their husbands, Sarah expresses her disbelief that there could be a better husband than hers, “I do think that there never was man more truly kind to a woman.” Anne Bradstreet expresses this same joy in her husband: “If ever two were one, then surely we/If ever man were lov’d by wife, then thee/If ever wife was happy in a man/Compare with me ye women if you can.” Another pattern—seen in the Winthrops, the Baxters, the Taylors, the Goodhues, the Bradstreets and others—is the way they encouraged each other to hope in the Lord, whether as a parting at death or a reminder that their love is second to the love of Christ.

Death abided as a constant reality in seventeenth and eighteenth century America, so the Puritans had many occasions to both mourn the loss of loved ones and remind each other of the hope thereafter. Forbearing the death of a husband or wife always proved a heart-wrenching experience, but grief co-existed with the faith in an eternal rest and the assurance of God’s sovereign goodness through adversity, as evidenced in the marriage of Samuel and Hannah Sewall. Samuel could “hardly write for tears” after the death of “my most Constant Lover” and “my dear wife.” John Danforth wrote a poem for the occasion of her funeral, telling how “Heaven Bless’d [Samuel] Sewall with this Noble Prize/Plac’d in the Chrystal Sphere of Chastest Love.” After praising her for her character, Danforth goes on to encourage Sewall “Strong Consolations from the Omnipotent/Let fill your Heart, in your thus Emptied Tent!” After the death of his wife, Thomas Shepard repented of nearly worshipping his wife, so greatly did he love her: “as the affliction was

very bitter so the Lord did teach me much by it, and I had need of it for I began to grow secretly proud and full of sensuality delighting my soule in my deare wife more than in my god whom I had promised better unto.”

Cotton Mather records in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* the virtues of a Bohemian woman who came to New England but died, praising her noble deeds and sacrifices in coming to America and starting a new life. “But as for her Virtuous Husband, Isaac Johnson, Esq.,” Cotton writes, he “try’d/To Live without her, lik’d it not, and Dy’d.” The loneliness of losing “his other half,” so to speak, resulted in this man’s sadness unto death. Reverend Jonathan Burr attended to his wife in her sickness so diligently that she encouraged him, “Don’t spend so much time with me, but go thy way and spend some time in prayer: thou knowest not what thou mayst obtain from God; I fear lest thou look too much upon this affliction.” These responses would seem to undermine social historian Sacvan Bercovitch’s claim that there existed a “seemingly cold, but properly Puritan reaction” of “stereotypical gloomy Puritan[s]” to the deaths of their wives. Edward Taylor opened a letter to his wife by pouring out his love to her while trying to constrain himself from displacing Christ as his chief affection, describing the love for his wife as “a golden ball of pure fire.” While traveling to New England, John Winthrop wrote to his wife, who had to remain in England for a time because of her health,

It goeth very near my heart to leave thee; but I know to whom I have committed thee, even to him who loves thee much better than any husband can...who can, and (if it be for his glory) will bring us together again with peace and comfort...Wherefore I will now take thee and my sweet children in mine arms, and kiss and embrace you all, and so leave you with my God. Farewell, farewell, I bless you all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

In a book dedicated to the praise of his wife’s life and character, Richard Baxter comments “These nineteen years I know not that we ever had any breach in the point of love, or point of interest...” Evidently, the testimonies of both Puritan husbands and wives reveal a mutual love that bonded them in the marriage covenant both spiritually and emotionally. The only restraint on these strong affections seemed to be their exaltation of Christ as Lord in their affections, though the Puritans considered worship enriching to their marital bond rather than prohibiting. Grounded in creation and blessed by God in redemption, marriage remained a holy privilege with sacred duties and mines of pleasure to be enjoyed. Marriage existed to glorify God throughout life, though the realities of death and eternity caused the Puritans to be conscientious about their marriage practices, as evidenced in their letters, diaries and other primary sources.

Expressions of love like these between husband and wife are of the

same frankness and genuineness in poetry as they are in letters, diaries and books, for the Puritans did not intend it to display an abstract ideal. As Morgan argues, “metaphorical description...does not weaken the obvious authenticity of their language.” The Puritans were expressing to one another “feelings that really existed,” and sought to unfold them to each other honestly and compellingly. For example, Thomas Hooker articulated “that same conjugall affection which makes her [wife] to take him to be her husband, works love in her in all these particulars...” It seems safe to conclude that, as Morgan argues, mutual passion and love between Puritan husbands and wives were not “exceptional,” but rather quite typical. The concept of covenantal love drove the theology and practice of Puritan marriage, as laid out in Scripture.

Covenant love in marriage is an essential foundation for the Puritans’ belief in the submission of a wife to her husband, never to be separated from it. All Christians were called to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” in service and charity. The wife’s submission, however, was a further call to honor her husband’s leadership in her disposition and inclination. The modern American mindset—much influenced by feminism—misreckons the idea of biblical submission in Puritan culture, attributing it to a kind of slavery or chauvinistic dominion over the “inferior” sex. While scattered quotes would seem to support this view in isolation from other primary texts, failure to gain a cohesive understanding of the Puritan worldview has resulted in inaccurate conclusions based on a priori assumptions about the relationship between men and women in their culture. For example, Marilyn Westerkamp argues that the Puritan men withheld positions of political and ecclesiastical leadership from women because they were power hungry and wished to domineer over women. Carol Karlsen assumes that women assured themselves of salvation by accepting their roles. Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker writes “The Puritans, believing that woman was one of Satan’s chief instruments for gaining control over men’s souls, insisted that she hide as much as possible.”

Contrary to such historiographical claims, Puritans believed in the value of the individual as God’s creation, the equality of men and women and the importance of role differentiation for both sexes. Examining specific examples, it is essential to understand what submission was not. The wife was not seen as inferior or slavish, but rather possessed equal value with her husband, with unique responsibilities of equal importance. John Winthrop called his wife “my faithful yokefellow.” Husband and wife lived their lives on a journey together, as “heirs together in the grace of life.” John Downname wrote that God “gave the wife unto the husband to be, not his servant, but his helper, counselor, and comforter.” Samuel Willard writes that a husband should so lead his wife “as that his Wife may take delight in it, and not account it a Slavery, but a Liberty and Priviledge...” Any other treatment, he persuades the reader “deriveth not from the Precept, but from the Corruption there is in

the Hearts of Men.” Thus, mistreatment of women is sin and always to be avoided. Also, Robert Cleaver wrote,

A wife is called by God himself an helper, and not an impediment or a necessary evil, as some unadvisedly do say...These and such like sayings, tending to the dispraise of women, some maliciously and indiscreetly do vomit out, contrary to the mind of the Holy Ghost, who said that she was ordained as a helper, and not a hinderer.

Women were also not required to submit to all men. A woman was only called to submit to the decisions made by her “own husband,” and not even then if he compromised her commitment to Christ by asking her to sin. The husband was not an “intermediary” between his wife and God, as Susan M. Felch argues. Felch contests that women with “status and vocation as spiritual [people]” could “access directly the divine will” and need not be hindered by their husbands’ intermediary decision-making. In light of Scriptures like Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11, the Puritans understood a wife’s submission as part of the divine will. Thus decision-making with her husband was a command and a blessing, but only Christ could serve as the qualified mediator between the wife and God.

Women were not altogether denied the role of possessing authority, but were expected to exercise authority over their children, servants and the affairs of the home. As Samuel Willard wrote “She is invested with an authority over them [her children] by God...” Richard Baxter wrote that, among other things, husband and wife were “...to be helpful to one another in the education of their children, and in the government of...the family.” Marriage was a partnership designed with order, and the family existed as a microcosm of ordered church and society. The Puritans knew submission and authority were required to obey God, and also—practically—because order was essential for society.

The Puritans valued order in society as a means of restraining evil, protecting innocence and freedom and preventing or punishing injustice. As true descendents of the Reformation, the Puritans understood the importance of standards; freedom equaled the liberty to do the right thing, not the liberty to do whatever one pleased at the expense of morality. According to this philosophy, individuals understood their liberty as safeguarded by boundaries and conditioned by accountability. Therefore, the submission of children to parents, wives to husbands, husbands to Christ and citizens to governments did not translate into bondage and suppression, but rather safety and security. In fact, Puritan law protected rather than violated the rights of women more than in native England and most other parts of the contemporary world. The “Body of Liberties” drawn up by Reverend Nathaniel Ward, based on the Mosaic Law, was milder than English law at the time. Wilson writes, “...

the introduction of biblical law ameliorated the harshness of the existing law.” Specific cases illustrate this same attitude in the community. For example, neighbors of Daniel Ela reported him for telling his wife Elizabeth “shee was none of his wife, shee was but his Servant.” Despite Elizabeth’s protesting, he was fined forty shillings. Morgan writes,

The Puritan wife of New England occupied a relatively enviable position by comparison, say, with the wife of early Rome or of the Middle Ages or even of contemporary England; for her husband’s authority was limited. He could not lawfully strike her, nor could he command her anything contrary to the laws of God, laws which were explicitly defined in the civil codes.

Benjamin Wadsworth points out that—even though the civil law should naturally not contradict Divine law—when a husband is bitter against his wife, beating or striking of her (as some vile wretches do) or in any unkind carriage, ill language, hard words, morose, peevish, surly behaviour; nay if he is not kind, loving, tender in his words and carriage to her; he then shames his profession of Christianity, he breaks the Divine Law, he dishonours God and himself too, by this ill behaviour.

Several other sources entailing extensive instructions based on biblical principles for fair treatment between husbands and wives include William Gouge’s *Of Domesticall Duties*, William Whatly’s *Duties of Married Persons* and *A Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage*, and works by Matthew Griffith, William Perkins and Daniel Rogers. Such works illustrate the Puritans’ conviction that benevolence and boundaries preserved the well being of everyone in the Puritan community.

While the Anne Hutchinson case is not the primary concern of this paper, it illustrates an aspect of Puritan order that is often miscomprehended. Hutchinson believed herself to be “in direct communication with the God-head” and was “prepared to follow the promptings of the voice within against all the precepts of the Bible, the churches, reason, or the government of Massachusetts.” Though many argue that Hutchinson served as the proponent of liberty and early forms of women’s rights, the opposite view can be argued when considering that her antinomianism—not her gender—remained the decisive issue. Husbands were the first to protect their wives from prosecution during the seventeenth century witch trials. Summoning witnesses who would testify to their wives’ godly character, husbands diligently intervened by “appealing to the authorities” in their wives’ defense. However, the dispersion of Hutchinson’s anti-law and anti-intellectual views would have resulted in the breakdown of law, order, and Puritanism itself—the

very structures that allowed liberty. Historian Janice Knight counter-argues that Puritan authority represented the unorthodox view of submission, while Hutchinson exemplified a truly free Christian and a truly free woman,

The antinomian years did not prove that this vision would produce heresy, as orthodox elders claimed, but rather that it supported a heightened version of Christian liberty...Hutchinson claimed the full freedom of a Christian to read her Bible without clerical mediation, and to witness her faith in private meetings and public gathering... God's testament produced saints all the more zealous in their spiritual labors precisely because they were freed from a system of obligation and reward.

Knight's view coincides with the idea of other feminist scholars, that Puritanism did not possess a cohesive understanding of Christian orthodoxy, "Puritanism is not to be defined by any one set of doctrinal, ecclesiological or liturgical practices or conviction" While Puritanism did change over the following centuries, such an argument is hard to support in light of colonial Puritanism's historic and well-defined commitments to orthodox confessions such as the Apostle's Creed, the Belgic Confession and the drafting of their own Westminster Confession and Westminster Catechisms in the 1640s. Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes, "...in some respects it may be possible...to treat the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in all the Christian denomination...as a distinct historical period called 'the confessional age.'" Church history and its historic understanding of ecclesiology, biblical exegesis, law and liberty connected the Puritans to the Patristic, medieval and Reformed creeds, and confessions of faith. Not only did Puritans hold to orthodox confessions of faith, but they also agreed with the Anglican Church and the historic Catholic Church that—as Scripture taught—"the church of the living God [is] a pillar and buttress of truth," not merely the individual. Like the Reformers, the Puritans fully encouraged the private reading of Scripture without clerical mediation, but as Pelikan states, "...it is the church that does the confessing of the faith, not only the individual. It is also the church that does...the defending of its faith and doctrine against heresy, the defending of its unity and love against schism." The church is to be a place of order "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints."

This verse immediately precedes the instruction, "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as also the law says." Exegetically speaking, Paul is communicating that women are not to fill the role of men by teaching other men; he does not mean that women cannot speak at all. It is also clear in other passages that women are expected to teach fellow women and children. Women understood the implications of heresy as well as men; Anne

Bradstreet herself commended her husband and father for their defense of truth in the Hutchinson case, as they had prominent seats in the proceedings due to their roles in New England's civil government. She writes "Truths friend thou wert, to errors still a foe,/Which caus'd Apostates to maligne so." Thus, heretics like Anne Hutchinson threatened Puritans because heresies such as antinomianism resulted in the compromise and dissolution of orthodox Christianity and societal order.

George Marsden shows that women who sought to establish their "earthly authority" through "spiritual authority," like Hutchinson, were rare cases. In his words, "Far more common were women who became spiritual models by submitting both to God and to properly delegated male authorities." Submission "empowered women" in the way it empowered all Christians—obeying God meant close fellowship with Him and triumph over sin, the devil and worldly temptations. Historians like Amanda Porterfield assume that submission could not have been desirable: "...the affectionate submissiveness exemplified by Puritan wives was not helplessness but a highly self-restrained and indirect means of exercising authority." This "teasing" of the text, so termed in women's history, jeopardizes the point. It is true that a woman's submissiveness was not helplessness, and it would indeed require self-control, but the Puritans viewed self-restraint as a good and blessed thing. Puritans knew boundaries were for the sake of freedom, not an oppression of freedom. Josephine Percy argues that Anne Bradstreet—America's first published poet—sought to "find an outlet for a pent-up rebellion against a new world forced upon her and against the Puritans' pieties that seemed the weary drizzle of an unremembered dream."

However, Puritan men and women motivated themselves by aiming to glorify God and serve others, not by asserting their personal rights according to the modern notion. The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer—"To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Individuals applied this to their personal lives and work. In the first published "captivity narrative," Mary Rowlandson gives her reason for writing; to "declare the works of the Lord, and his wonderful power in carrying us along, preserving us in the wilderness, while under the enemies' hand, and returning us in safety again." Anne Bradstreet likewise writes, "I have not studied in this you read to show my skill, but to declare the Truth—not to sett forth myself, but the Glory of God." Such expressions do not seem written by pent-up rebellious women manipulating the system to exercise authority. Anne does not appear to be so in this quote or elsewhere in her poetry. Throughout her lines, as McElrath and Robb contend, "Bradstreet seems hardly the repressed and affection-denying victim of an emotionally sterile culture—if, indeed, that was the actual nature of her culture." Thus arguments like Porterfield and Percy's seem to assume that the Puritan woman harbored

desires she did not express.

The Puritans understood that men and women were called to unique roles mainly because the relationship between husband and wife reflected the relationship between Christ and His church. Puritans understood submission in light of Scriptures such as Ephesians 5. Not only did the husband have the responsibility to love and care for his wife “as his own body,” but his prayers could be hindered if he failed to uphold this sacred responsibility to “live with [his] wife in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.” The wife likewise risked “blaspheming the Word of God” if she was not “obedient to her husband.” The parallel relationship between husband and wife and Christ and His church held weighty spiritual significance that the Puritans referenced and emphasized frequently. Thomas Hooker was only one of many who proclaimed this central allegory in his preaching. Illustrating the love between Christ and His church, Hooker noted, “Now if we have taken him [Christ] to be our husband, then we shall love him as a wife loveth her husband.” Speaking of the substitutionary atonement wherein Christ has given Himself for believers, he writes

If a man give himself to a woman to become her husband, there is a great matter in that; but if the man shall give himself for the woman, when shee is to die, to die for her, that is more; he that giveth himself to her doth yet enjoy himself, but he that giveth himself for her doth lose himself...Oh this, this is the love of Christ to all believers.

Just as Christ sacrificed Himself for the church and purified her, so the husband was called to sacrifice for his wife and care for her spiritually and physically, though imperfectly. The Trinity served as another relationship exemplifying submission. Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the three distinct Persons of the Godhead—co-existed as equally God and yet fulfilled different roles. Christ submitted to the will of the Father, and the Holy Spirit submitted to both Father and Son, yet all three remained equal.

Puritans also based their general views of women on these concepts of love, submission and order. As “an authority on the history of attitudes toward romantic love has observed,” “in any culture there is usually a close connection between the prevailing view of marriage and physical sexuality, and the attitude adopted towards women.” As primary sources attest, the Puritans glorified sex and marriage, and they correspondingly held positive views toward women. The Puritans lived during a period of time generally misogynistic toward women, yet their treatment and view of women proved ahead of their time. For example, Matthew Henry wrote in a commentary on Genesis 2:22, “The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to top him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon my him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected,

and near his heart to be beloved.”

Most Puritans were vehement in protesting rather than defending the censorious and derogatory views of women hailed by some of their contemporaries. The aforementioned quotes by Cleaver and Willard are strikingly similar to what John Cotton wrote about individuals holding such views, “...women are creatures without which there is no comfortable living for man...They are a sort of blasphemers then who despise and decry them, and call them a necessary evil, for they are a necessary good.” Cleaver wrote also, “Most true it is that women are as men reasonable creatures, and have flexible wits, both to good and evil...yet that doth no more prove the malice of their nature than of men, and therefore the more ridiculous and foolish are they that have inveighed against the whole sex for a few evil.” Anne Bradstreet joined the forum in defending her sex, but not against all men in general. In her poetry, she asks that the achievements of women be recognized by contemporary chauvinists, and humorously refers to the so-called “inferiority of women.” As McElrath and Robb contend, “When Bradstreet wittily brings up the topic of the alleged inferiority of women it seems clearly understood by writer and reader that all women are not by nature inferior to all men,” for “Rather, they [Bradstreet’s lines] tell us that the author and her audience found such nonsense the stuff from which jokes are made.”

Some scholars reveal their biases by arguing that Bradstreet was a pent-up rebel who felt “forced to praise her Maker” and whose poetry contained “suppressed note[s] of outrage.” As McErath and Robb comment, Bradstreet’s husband “made her life as happy as it could be for a woman who both suffered frequent illnesses and deliberately cultivated a traditional Christian perspective on the shortlived pleasures and frustrations of this world.” She did not harbor bitterness against men, referring to men as “the Other,” but rather embraced as dear the males in her life; God, father, husband and son. Bradstreet understood the difference between godly men who encouraged women in their womanhood and abilities, and men who merely wished to inflate their own importance. Secure in her womanhood, as Wilson argues, “Anne Bradstreet knew that men who preserve their authority by undervaluing the legitimate achievements of women were not masculine. In fact, they were exhibiting their insecurities, the antithesis of masculinity.”

Anne Bradstreet, John Cotton, Cotton Mather, Robert Cleaver, and other Puritans who felt it necessary to defend women perhaps thought of contemporary lambasting by non-Puritan men such as William Goddard in his 1616 *A Satirycall Dialogue Or a Sharplye invective conference, betweene Allexander the great, and that truelye woman-hater Diogynes*, or Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women: Or the vanitie of them, choose you whether published in 1615*. Both of these works clearly malign the character and nature of women, painting the picture

of the misogynic that Puritan men and women clearly opposed. By writing "There is no way to make hir good with stripes except thou beate hir to death," Swetnam contradicts the teachings of the Puritan marriage manuals that call for kindness and condemn physical or even verbal harm done to the wife. Such a sharp contrast between contemporary men's views demonstrates the Puritan's treatment and view of women as more enlightened. The "precept" that Samuel Willard mentions of treating one's wife with love and respect is apparent in Puritan theology, and most men and women opposed rather than lauded a disrespectful attitude toward women, including mothers.

Puritan women viewed motherhood as a glorious gift, a cause for earnest prayer and petitioning. Children were not considered a burden—"a quiver full of them" meant blessing and honor. Anne Bradstreet greatly desired children, despite her knowledge of risk in childbirth, and wrote "It pleases God to keep me a long time without a child, which was a great grief to me, and cost mee many prayers and tears before I obtained one, and after him gave mee many more." She dedicated poems to her children and grandchildren with warmth and maternal love. Her desire for children and great care of her own eight attenuates Cheryl Walker's claim that Bradstreet felt "hampered by children" in her quest for "female independence." The feminists' empowerment assertion, "For women, motherhood had to substitute for political influence," incorrectly assumes that Puritan women saw domestic life as worthless and aspired to the same goals as certain modern feminists do. As former feminist F. Carolyn Graglia comments, "Feminists recount endless tales of women's oppression throughout the ages, but one of the greatest injustices to women is feminists' own success in convincing society to treat as a sacrifice what for some women can be the most rewarding occupation of their lives."

Many Puritans refuted the poor medieval Catholic view of womanhood and motherhood, exemplified by their renunciation of the "purification of women." This Catholic rite maintained by the Anglican Church after the Reformation was a ceremony to welcome the mother of a newborn child (one month after birth) back into the church. Its purpose was "to remove the stigma of sexuality and childbirth from a mother." The Puritans opposed this, however, because they not only saw it as unbiblical and ritualistic, but they valued sexuality, motherhood, and childbirth, seeing the mother as no less a member of the congregation than others. The Puritans objected to the idea that a "green mother," one who was in between giving birth and the purification ceremony, could not enter the church, were "inherently dangerous," and "should even be buried outside of consecrated grounds." Such a stance indicates the Puritans' belief in the equality of women before God and the right of mothers to be included in the congregation.

Women were thought capable of intellectual pursuits, as long as they did not neglect the important tasks of caring for their children and other

domestic duties. Samuel Torshell wrote, “women are capable of the highest improvement and the greatest glory to which man may be advanced.” Although women were not afforded many economic or political opportunities in an era emerging from a misogynous European worldview, several Puritan families in England are known to have encouraged their daughters’ education. Anne Bradstreet’s father educated her in a wide gamut of Christian, Humanist and Classical texts; he was a devout Puritan who, according to Bercovitch, “saw no contradiction between his religious beliefs and the enjoyment of good literature, and he was exceptional among Puritan men in advocating the philosophical and literary education of young women.” Men like John Woodbridge—the relative who published Bradstreet’s poetry without her knowledge—Edward Taylor, Nathaniel Ward and Cotton Mather praised Bradstreet’s talents and wrote dedications in her books. Bradstreet was not censured or criticized for her work, but “If anything, the tone of much of the poetry which was first read by a familial audience indicates that she was treated as at least an intellectual equal...” A poet himself, Edward Taylor kept Anne Bradstreet’s works in his private library as his only volume of poetry. Clement Barksdale wrote “I cannot wonder at Apollo now, That he with Female Lawrell crown’d his brow, That made him witty: bad I leave to chuse, My Verse should be a Page unto your Muse.” Cotton Mather wrote “Reader, America justly admires the Learned Women of the other Hemisphere...Ann Bradstreet...whose Poems, divers times Printed, have afforded a grateful Entertainment unto the Ingenious, and a Monument for her Memory beyond the Stateliest Marbles.”

Anne Vaughan Lock, poetess and text translator, was “highly regarded within her community as a staunch defender of the Reformed faith” in England. A friend of John Knox, she exchanged over thirty letters with him during and after the Reformation. He treated her as a spiritual and intellectual equal, employing her help in court, discussing the theological soundness of the Book of Common Prayer with her and asking for her advice. Christopher Goodman, an associate of Lock in Geneva and guest preacher at Exeter cathedral, had Lock’s sonnet sequence on Psalm 51 set to music. He also commissioned Andro Kemp, the song schoolmaster, to compose “a polyphonic, four-part setting” which is preserved in the St. Andrew’s Psalter. Jane Colman Turell received praise from her husband Ebenezer, who remarked that she wrote “pieces of wit and humor, which if publish’d would give a brighter idea of her to some of [her] readers.” Other published female writers in England and colonial America include Grace Smith, Susanna Rogers, Mary French, Jane Colman Goodman, Anna Hayden, Sarah Kemble Knight and Ann Eliza Bleecker. These women “demonstrate a familiarity with the entirety of Europe’s Classical, Christian, Humanist and Reformation heritage: Greek and Latin poets and philosophers; the Church Fathers; Italian and French Renaissance writers; Lutheran and Reformed theologians...works by English

Puritan divines; and Tudor and Stuart poets and dramatists.” Thus English women were recognized in Reformed and Puritan circles as well, a sure sign if men like Knox and Calvin included them in the male-majority realms of politics and economics.

Puritan women enjoyed control of some financial matters, as Samuel Sewall’s diary attests:

relying upon her superior financial judgment...I paid Capt. Belchar 8—15—0 Took 24s in my pocket, and gave my Wife the rest of my cash 4—3—8, and tell her she shall now keep the Cash; if I want I will borrow of her. She has a better faculty than I at managing Affairs: I will assist her; and will endeavour to live upon my Salary; will see what it will doe. The Lord give his Blessing.

In his will, Lock’s husband Henry left to Anne “my worldly goodes whatsoever they be.” Felch admits “Although the evidence is slight, it points toward the Lock marriage as one that realized the companionate ideal proposed by Protestant marriage manuals.”

Puritan men also cultivated and encouraged the spiritual growth of their wives. Jonathan Edwards thought that his wife, “Sarah’s experience... perfectly fit the highest spiritual standards to which the most mature Christian should aspire.” He was impressed to the point of incorporating her account in his treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*. Edwards not only illustrates a lack of jealousy for his wife’s spiritual growth; he shows a glowing admiration of it. Samuel Hopkins writes that, in character and ability, Sarah Edwards “set an example worthy the imitation of all.” Husbands often encouraged their wives in the knowledge of the Scriptures, as they were charged in Ephesians 5. Cotton Mather heralds the characters of women like Mr. Oliver St. John’s daughter, an “excellent woman” who “upheld a daily and constant Communion with God, in the Devotions of her Closet; one, who not only Wrote the Sermons that she heard on the Lord’s Days with much Dexterity, but Liv’d them, and Liv’d on them all the Week.” Reverend John Fisk’s wife “possessed a knowledge of the Scriptures, that she served her husband as a concordance.” There are also numerous spiritual narratives of lay New Englanders, recorded (between 1637 and 1701) as professions of faith for church membership, in Cambridge, Chelmsford and East Windsor. These accounts reveal that men and women had equally astonishing amounts of Scriptural knowledge. Servants, housewives, college students, farmers, artisans and magistrates alike related their conversion processes and confessions of faith—some of the women include Joan Moore, Mrs. Hincksman and Ann Fitch. Thus there is evidence of the Puritans’ acceptance and respect of women in the church, as well as their promotion of women’s spiritual and intellectual abilities.

Samuel Willard commented on the mutual duty of admonition; husband and wife should both “choose the fittest seasons to reprove each other, for things which their love and duty calls for.” Men and women also saw each other as brothers and sisters in Christ with similar duties to one another. Mrs. Huntley, speaking of her Christian friendship with John Winthrop, calls him “dear and loving brother.” His “swett and Cristian” letters encouraged her, and did “so cheare up” her heart in her afflictions.

In conclusion, it would be beneficial to the historical studies of Puritan women in America to include the perspective that Puritan women enjoyed fulfilling traditional roles and were not suppressed. While feminist scholars assert that a culture committed to the biblical concepts of covenant love, submission, and a woman’s allegiance to her home, husband and children must be oppressive, there is ample evidence to conclude that a majority of Puritan women embraced their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers as the good will of God. Puritan women did not seem to agitate for independence from their families and domestic callings; they sought to glorify God in their every day commitments as a life of worship. Rather than demanding their personal rights and rebelling against authority, women who recorded their personal experiences expressed satisfaction and delight in their marriages, children and relationship with God.

Women such as Anne Bradstreet, Sarah Goodhue, Margaret Winthrop and Mary Rowlandson provide the most extensive documentation from a female perspective, thus their accounts serve as representative of the Puritan woman’s experience rather than exceptional. In fundamental ways, the Puritan women’s mindset differed from that of most modern feminists. Dedicating to causes outside of themselves, living lives committed to the Word of God, anticipating a judgment before a holy God and desiring a glorious eternity, Puritan men and women encouraged womanhood according to the standards of Scripture. They upheld equality of the sexes in marriage and society, valuing covenant love and submission as essential for obedience, enjoyment and order. Puritans held a high view of women and respected women’s character and abilities, though influences of a misogynic worldview would take time to overcome. Historians need to understand the Puritan woman according to her own desires and worldview, not their own; then and only then will America understand Puritan womanhood and its importance.

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