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The New England Puritans: History, Social Order, and Gender

ABSTRACT

The article will address the history of the Puritan migration from England to early colonial America, contextualizing their social order and gender in culture in the New World given special emphasis to their theology. The methodology employed is qualitative analysis of factors that: caused Puritan emigration and their early experience in Massachusetts Bay; organized their social structure; and illuminated the position of gender in culture. Generally, Puritans migrated out of New England for varying reasons but primarily out of deep-seated theological frustrations with the Church of England. Their theology is then described and assigned its place as the organizing principle of society; understanding this, gender is consequentially realized as not a particularly useful category of culture for the Puritans although we can observe how cultural works articulated women's position in society—which was principally as wives, mothers, and worshipers.

KEYWORDS: Puritanism, New England Puritans, gender in culture, early colonial America

STRESZCZENIE

Purytanie Nowej Anglii: Historia, porządek społeczny, płeć

Artykuł dotyczy historii migracji purytanów z Anglii do wczesnej kolonialnej Ameryki, kontekstualizując purytański porządek społeczny i płeć w kulturze Nowego Świata, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem teologii. Zastosowaną metodologią jest jakościowa analiza czynników, które spowodowały emigrację purytanów i ich wczesne doświadczenia w Zatoce Massachusetts, zorganizowały ich strukturę społeczną, a także naświetliły pozycję płci w ich kulturze. W ujęciu ogólnym, purytanie wyemigrowali z Anglii z różnych powodów, przede wszystkim w wyniku głęboko zakorzenionej frustracji teologicznej wobec Kościoła Anglii. Następnie opisana i przypisana do miejsca jako zasada

organizująca społeczeństwo jest w tekście teologia purytańska. Na tym tle konsekwentnie objaśniona zostaje płeć jako nieszczególnie użyteczna kategoria kultury dla purytanów, chociaż możemy zaobserwować, w jaki sposób dzieła kultury artykułowały pozycję kobiet w społeczeństwie – głównie jako żon, matek i wyznawczyń kultu.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: purytanizm, purytanie Nowej Anglii, płeć w kulturze,
                wczesna kolonizacja Ameryki

1. Introduction

Difficulties defining Puritans and Puritanism have stretched throughout the subsequent history of its academic study. Differing focuses on their theology, politics, culture, and connection to later American sociological developments have pulled the conversation in many, sometimes incompatible directions. As Edmund Morgan (1967) cited in his book *Roger Williams*, a recent study even concluded that Puritans did not exist, but rather Puritan-associated attitudes were held by almost all English Protestants to various degrees from 1570–1640. This has undoubtedly been further complicated by the popular depiction of Puritans in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and the sensationalization of the Salem Witch Trials in modern American culture. Therefore, it's beneficial to clarify that, as C.H. George in the article "Puritanism as History and Historiography" pointed out, "puritanism" as a concept was not concretely defined by the people of its era, but Puritans nonetheless were characterizable in Elizabethan England as,

> Conforming, beneficed ministers who wished to limit the concept of *adiaphora* [things "indifferent" or non-essential in worship—R.B.], to improve the quality and frequency of sermons, and to influence more aggressively the ethics of the laity. Puritans were overwhelmingly moderate and clerical reformers (1968, p. 78).

The general disposition that Puritans carried was that of purifying and perfecting the Protestant project that had been articulated by Martin Luther and John Calvin and formalized by Henry VIII in the English Reformation. Calvinism formed the bedrock of Puritan thought (especially after the Marian Exile) asserting at its core the depravity in man from original sin, predestination, and divine sovereignty (Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). These religious determinants had incontrovertible consequences on the Puritan social order in New England and the place of women in culture. The paper will qualitatively address first: a review of the historical

context that precipitated the Puritan flight from England and their arrival to the New World; defining features of their social organization including theology (from which all else is derived), the "city upon a hill" idea, and the role of the family; and how gender is realized through the writings of Puritans Anne Bradstreet and Sarah Goodhue.

2. Historical Review

2.1. Tudor England

The age that birthed the Puritan sentiment more broadly was one of fervent religious exploration and discordance. There is no decided beginning or end to its history, and so for the sake of pertinency the paper will briefly discuss Tudor England and the Massachusetts Bay Colony, knowing that the history is too extensive to document here. As a Protestant, Elizabeth I restored the Church of England but nonetheless sought compromise between the Puritan groups and Catholic clergy and allowed for difference in religious interpretations and opinions not in conflict with Scripture (Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). Prior to her reign, her sister Mary Tudor had installed Catholicism as the faith of England, sending Protestant leaders into exile and executing several hundred dissenters (Ortmann et al., 2006). Those sentenced to death were martyrized in the popular John Foxe work *Book of Martyrs*, which both invigorated Protestant reformers and contributed to the common interpretation of Mary as "bloody" (Ortmann et al., 2006). Those in "Marian Exile" in continental Europe came in contact with John Calvin and Henry Bullinger, which further synthesized their theology until they returned to England upon the accession of Elizabeth (where they consequentially were conscripted into major halls of power) (Ortmann et al., 2006). In the Elizabethan Settlement, the theology was decidedly Protestant and eliminated some of the more blatantly "adiaphoric" practices, but worship would include elements of the Catholic mass—kneeling, wearing of vestments, genuflecting—and services would follow the form structured in a revised *Book of Common Prayer* (Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). Disappointment with the Elizabethan reforms, that they did not go far enough in ridding England's churches of Catholic influence, formed the more concrete sentiment of Puritanism as it rose in popularity and fervor through the following Stuart kings James I and Charles I.

2.2. Great Migration to New England

The Puritan exodus from England was not primed by a singular event but a set of circumstances and attitudes forming in the period. However, the general consensus highlights religious disapprobation as the catalyst for the Puritan's departure. Charles I continually revealed his preference for the Catholic-oriented worship and episcopacy, with once-banned practices in Elizabethan times reemerging in worship (baptismal fonts, chalices, clerical vestments, etc.) (Hall, 2019). Puritans became increasingly antagonistic in light of the more Catholic sympathetic and persecutive regime of Charles I under the counsel of William Laud. Furthermore, Charles I had disbanded Parliament in 1629, furthering Puritan concerns that their theological grievances would never be addressed (Bremer, 1995). Once colonists had settled in Massachusetts Bay they complained of being "unable to find God's presence in ordinances, being full of mixtures" in England and acknowledged the "purity" in New England compared to the "superstitions" that "clouded God in ordinances" of their homeland (Hall, 2019). The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, summarized the necessity to leave England to secure a land from which the church would be "better preserved from the Common corruptions of this evil world" (Hall, 2019). An anxiety over England's ordained future had seriously manifested in the Puritans leaving for the New World, who also looked to several economic depressions and evidence of God's increasing wrath for England. The textile industry had severely depressed in the run-up to the Great Migration, bad harvests rocked east England, and the apprehension of future Godly punishment was pervasive prior to migration (Bremer, 1995).

Out of this context, the Providential calling to build a model Christian community across the Atlantic took form. The Puritans hoped to set a divine example for for the rest of Christendom, to hopefully show a path of further reformation, and "usher in the millennium—the thousand-year rule of the saints foretold in Revelations" (Bremer, 1995). In 1629 the Crown granted the Massachusetts Bay Company a charter and departure preparations commenced (Bremer, 1995). 1630–1640 was the official period of the Great Migration, in which the population of Massachusetts rose by an estimated 10,000 people—from 3,000 to 14,000 (Nellis, 1932). The event was marked by the departure of John Winthrop aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 (Ortmann et al., 2006). Limited in civic expertise, governance was initially quite disjointed but relied on some inspiration from previous colonies at Salem and Plymouth. A social covenant was established contractually with the people, which included a Board of Assistants responsible for legislation over the colony, setting wages, levying taxes,

banning certain exchanges such as corn and firearms, etc. (Bremer, 1995). Eventually, governance in the new colony was reformed in a reinterpretation of "freemen" from, originally, those stockholders in the charter company to, after, defining the "freeman" by church membership so that the colony would rule as Israel ruled Israel in an assurance of Godly governance (Hall, 2019). The freeman, however, were limited in their power and only allowed to select the assistants who would then select the governor (Bremer, 1995, p. 59).

Establishing a society in the New World, however, meant contention with the already-settled American Indian tribes of the region. Relations with the surrounding tribes were quite complex and the Puritans lacked a concrete strategy, but they acknowledged their right to destroy enemy combatants mainly under Old Testament commands and drew comparisons to witches and demons (Parker, 2014; Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). The Pequot tribe, who were well established in the region prior to settler arrival, commanded a considerable territory and rested control over the lucrative wampum and fur trade in exchange with Dutch and some English traders (Pasteryak, 2020). Skirmishes and war quickly ensued, with the Puritans striking a decisive blow to the Pequot at Mystic River, which left 5,000 Pequot men, women, and children dead and the entire village razed to the ground (Ortmann et al., 2006). Nonetheless, Puritans hoped to eventually, passively evangelize other Native American populations "to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and savior of mankind, and the Christian faith" (Parker, 2014, p. 80). The Pequot War would be overshadowed in English casualties by the later King Philip's War (1675) with the Wampanoag in which roughly ten percent of the colonist population was killed by conflict's end in 1676 (Ortmann et al., 2006). The colonial towns further inland were ravaged, a dozen of them burnt to the ground, while the Wampanoag Indians suffered worse yet—losing their chief, financial support from English trade, and most survivors were forced into slavery (Ortmann et al., 2006). The Puritans in Massachusetts reckoned with the conflict as a providential judgement for their sin, lack of faith, materialism, etc. and followed with a period of piety characterized by fasting and prayer (Ortmann et al., p. 440). Violence with the Indians of the region certainly shaped the Puritan conscience in relation to their covenant theology (which will be discussed below). The clergy had established that the Puritan's disasters resulted from their lack of humility before God, and their eventual success in King Philip's War—after many days of declared humiliation—further cemented the social order.

3. Social Organization

3.1. Theology

The gravitational center of Puritan social organization was indisputably their Calvinist-oriented theology, from which all features of the family, society, etc. were formulated. They believed devoutly in the inerrancy of the Bible, as it was written by God it was infallible and had the final authority in not just religious but every-day life; Scripture was read non allegorically and was viewed as personally and socially applicable (Ryken, 1990). Puritans more urgently recognized the unavoidable depravity inherited to all man from Adam and Eve and that, "only God's merciful saving grace, dispensed through Christ without relation to merit, could save him from the eternal damnation that all men deserved" (Morgan, 1967, p. 22). In constant conflict with God was the force of the devil, as Miller quoted the Puritan Mitchell, "New-England is but Earth and not Heaven; No place on Earth is exempted form molestation by the Devil and his Instruments" (1983, p. 179). In their conception of the devil, as was characteristically Protestant, temptation—tempting man to sin—was the devil's primary polemic (Ortmann et al., 2006). The ubiquity of diabolic agency hence required constant diligence. Additionally crucial to their system was the belief that the whole physical world was ruled by Providence, so all disasters, crop failures, or sunny days, were judgements from God (Miller, 1983). The Puritan response was to enter a covenant and emulate Israel, whose people were "visible in an external organization" (Miller, 1983, p. 21).

Scholar Perry Miller demonstrated in *The New England Mind* that covenant theology was the "master idea of the age" and "the basis both of church polity and social theory" (1983, p. 21). In its most rudimentary understanding, covenants were agreements that provided the foundation for church congregations, although worshipers had a personal covenant with God as well. Their themes were of mutual faith and fraternity, community protection, dedicated worship, and leading lives by the gospel (Ortmann et al., 2006). These group-covenants differed from the internal Covenant of Grace (between God and individual) in that these congregational covenants were to address external ends, or group prosperity, not salvation of the group as a whole (Miller, 1983). The Puritans synthesized covenants as a communal devotion to God, a way of addressing their tribulations through a shared abidance of God's rules (Miller, 1983). Resultantly, church covenants organized days of thanksgiving and humiliation in accordance with the plights and victories bestowed upon them that took on ritualistic form, gathering the people in churches daily, in order to adequately address the judgements of God (Miller, 1983). Covenants, which

were most often written and received public (churchgoers) input, brought the Puritans into social cohesion—united in their faith—and allowed them to divinely navigate the New World.

For the Puritans, the social hierarchy was static and ordained by God as it was also considered in Elizabethan England. William Hubbard remarked on this idea in a sermon, "it is not then the result of time or chance, that some are mounted on horse-back, while others are left to travel on foot" (Miller, 1983). The monarchy and nobles were elected by God, and the rich and poor would always exist in society with the spirit of God influencing justice and mercy between groups (Parker, 2014). John Winthrop in one of his sermons quotes, "every man might have need of other, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection" demonstrating an aspect of their "social" concept (Parker, 2014, p. 40). That the group remain faithful and humble to God was the glue for society.

3.2. City Upon a Hill

John Winthrop famously coined his "city upon a hill" speech upon arriving to the shores of Massachusetts, saying "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us" (Parker, 2014, p. ix). The city upon a hill mythos is by now well-known and referenced in academia and politics and misinterpreted as the root of American exceptionalism. What was specifically meant by Governor John Winthrop's city upon a hill was not the singular exceptionalism of the New World Puritans but rather the creation of a model from which England (and other colonies, secondarily), replete with popish sentiment, could observe and reform itself. Perry Miller recognized that if the Church of England had sufficiently changed upon witnessing an auspicious Puritan project, the Puritans in New England may well have returned to their motherland (1983, p. 225). Given this condition of setting an example, an impressive dedication to faith and pure execution of covenant theology was obviously necessary. As did Calvin in Geneva, Winthrop in the Bay Colony enforced strict laws on appearance, consumption, sex, spread Protestant literature, and banished/executed enemies of the faith (Parker, 2014).

One such case was Anne Hutchinson, who in 1638 was banished from the colony for preaching to residents an illegal form of antinomianism (Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). Her basic position was that one not need demonstrate observation of the Sabbath, listening to preaching, or reading Scripture in order to prove familiarity with Christ (Pastoor & Johnson, 2007). Threatening the orthodoxy of the church was a direct threat

to the Bay Colony project, being perceived even as a violent threat to it, and the government made sure to deal a heavy-handed blow to Hutchinson and her followers (Parker, 2014). Again, her punishment was more a religious maneuverer than gendered or political—to spare the colony of divine judgement for Hutchinson's erroneous departure from Scripture. Already the sinful nature of Hutchinson was evident for Winthrop in her follower Mary Dyer, who was pregnant but delivered a premature fetus—a clear sign of providential punishment (Miller, 1983). Puritans did not cite this as an aspect of the rigidity in their worship, but we may consider "the city upon a hill" as a contributing factor to their diligence and austerity in maintaining godliness while understanding that in reality, the fundamental issues of Puritan life were not political or social but religious. The city upon a hill was a theological-purification of their society and in dealing punitively with internal threats such as Anne Hutchinson, and external threats such as the Native Americans, Puritans displayed their pious rigor in defending their city.

3.3. The Family and Marriage

One unique aspect of the Great Migration to the Bay Colony was that it consisted primarily of family units and not individuals or young men as in the voyages to Virginia. Puritan Robert Cleaver stressed the importance and functions of a family in his writings,

> A household is as it were a little commonwealth, by the good government whereof, God's glory may be advanced, the commonwealth which standeth of several families, benefitted, and all that live in that family may receive much comfort and commodity (Bremer, 1995).

In the Puritan world the family was contextualized as such, providing comfort and connection to its members, a space for theological practice and growth, and a replication of the civil order. The highest emphasis of the family lay in its religious function, however, as a "little church." Here the institution was responsible for regular Scripture readings, catechizing, and prayer (Bremer, 1995). At the head of the household was the father, who led the family in its faith and reflection while also materially providing for them (Ortmann et al., 2006). As a microcosm of the larger society itself, the family was fundamental in the social organization with marriage contractually and spiritually ratifying its existence.

The Puritan's, as all Protestants, defined marriage differently than Catholics, who viewed marriage as sacrament and an indissoluble union

before God (Bremer, 1995). Marriage of course was ordained by God in a covenant, the pair as spiritual equals, the partnership had a responsibility to raise godly children and foster love for one another, and the woman was expected to submit to the father's governance (Bremer, 1995; Wadsworth, 1712). In John Winthrop's "Speech to the Massachusetts," he outlined a core tenant of the Puritan understanding of women in marriage,

> The woman's own choice makes… a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband's authority (Winthrop, 1645).

Although the language appears austere to the modern reader, the hierarchical formation of marriage was not a prescription of value but rather function, that men served as the final say. The relationship was intended to be mutual and cordial as Puritan John Downame described the prevailing attitude towards women in marriage, that God, "gave the wife unto the husband to be, not his servant, but his helper, counselor, and comforter" (Ryken, 1990, p. 77). Husbands and wives had shared authority in the day-to-day management of the household as scholar Leland Ryken quoted the Puritan William Gouge, "In general the government of the family… belongeth to the husband and wife both" (1990, p. 78). Sex was encouraged in marriage and of the husband was expected love for his wife and wife's subjection to his love, as Samuel Willard said, a man's love for his wife ought to be, "like Christ's to his church: holy for quality, and great for quantity" (Ryken, 1995, p. 76). The emphasis on companionship and contractual nature of marriage meant women often approached equality in decision-making (although not totally). Despite existing under male authority in the household, Puritan women often rejoiced in their role as mothers and wives and didn't necessarily conceptualize patriarchal family structure as oppressive.

4. Gender as a Cultural Category eve, mandatory reading

4.1. Gender

Professor Francis Bremer in his book, *The Puritan Experiment*, outlines a myriad of ways in which the general situation of women was improving in colonial New England. The tremendous demands for labor in sustaining a new colony meant that women began receiving better economic

opportunities (Bremer, 1995). Moreover, marrying above one's class was more common, and educational opportunities were increasingly available (Bremer, 1995). It is commonly remarked that the Puritans were of the most literate societies on the planet at the time, as women were, progressively for the era, taught to read Scripture from an early age. Women in America (and England) saw improvements in literacy, legal rights, and their roles as mothers and wives were more honored than before (Ryken, 1990). Women's role was nonetheless theorized primarily in the domestic sphere, where women often ran finances, shared responsibility in child rearing, and managed the barnyard, garden, and orchard (Bremer, 1995). However, we should hesitate to equate this with an oppressive condition. Although women were lower in the social hierarchy by technicality, Bremer quotes Richard Bolton who bluntly describes the equality of souls before God, "Souls have no sexes" (1995, p. 115). Turning to women's literature in Puritan New England, we will notice that women's own reflections on their state in culture was not as solemn as popular consensus would dictate.

4.2. Anne Bradstreet

Of New England's most prolific cultural figures was Anne Bradstreet, was known as the New World's first female poet. Bradstreet lived quite comfortably in England before migratin g to the New World in 1630 (Miller, 1956). As a well-read woman, her poems demonstrated knowledge of greats such as Spenser and Sidney, and she very likely read Greek and Latin poetry (Miller, 1956). Her works, such as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, are of the most extensive of any Puritan woman of the time despite the difficulties in getting published as women at the time. In her poem, "A Letter to her Husband" she wrote,

> 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 lie?
> So many steps head from the heart to sever,
> If but a neck, soon should we be together. (Bradstreet, n.d)

In these lines we can immediately sense that her marriage is a joyous and fulfilling one, her husband being her head, heart, eyes, life, joy, etc. The more doctrinal view supports Bradstreet's illustration of marriage, in which Benjamin Wadsworth penned in 1712 that the husband's "government

should not be with rigor, haughtiness, harshness, severity, but with the greatest love, gentleness, kindness, tenderness that may be. Though he governs her, he must not treat her as a servant, but as his own flesh; he must love her as himself." Bradstreet furthers this notion of genuine love in *Several Poems*, "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" (Miller, 1956, l.3, 936). She here compellingly demonstrates that marriage was not so confining of an institution, something corroborated in the writings of Puritan Sarah Goodhue. In her *Valedictory and Monitory Writing*, Goodhue describes the great love she has of her husband, "A tender-hearted, affectionate, and entire loving husband thou hast been to me several ways…I do think that there never was man more truly kind to a woman" (1850, p. 11). Her passion and seriousness in faith is also frequently reflected, "That Christ is the best, most precious. most durable portion…I for ever desire to bless and praise the Lord…" (1850, p. 6). Ultimately, their works reveal that women's culture in Puritanism was dominated by the family and love in marriage and that they quite seriously rejoiced in their position as mothers and wives.

Again drawing from Bradstreet's *Several Poems*, her dedication to God is apparent, "But my arise is from above, Whence my dear Father I do love… For my ambition lies above. My greatest honor it shall be/ When I am victor over thee" (Miller, 1956, l.3, 912). Although I will not quote the exhaustive references and dedications she writes to God, the vertebrae for Anne Bradstreet's poetry is made entirely of her faith, which produces her principle societal roles as a wife and mother. She moreover appears delighted in motherhood, especially in her work *Meditations* composed of advice for her "dear" son Simon Bradstreet, for whom she prays for grace and salvation (Miller, 1956, l.3, 985). From her works we notice these subjects assuming the thematic center. Although women's experiences were of course varied in the colonies, Bradstreet's outlook is confirmed in the depictions of other women like Sarah Goodhue, and her artistic endeavors confirm theology as organizing of women's experience.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the Puritans through Tudor England unto the colonies was an incredibly complex history, and despite their general resolve and discipline, the explicit project entered into decline in the 18th century. Popular depictions of Puritans have often misconstrued the nature of their way of life, culture, and social organization; to assert gender and its oppression as an organizing principle of Puritan society would be suspect

considering the well-known primary documents and landmark scholar-ship done by the likes of Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan, David Hall, and others. Understanding that the base framework of their society rested in theology is crucial in elucidating women's unique position as wives and mothers, church members, authors, and poets. Gender as a category can only be understood through Puritan theology, which acknowledged women principally through the familial and pious lenses. Like all Puri-tans, man or woman, women were equal in the eyes of God and their pri-mary task was salvation, amorous devotion and submission in marriage, and the godly upbringing of their family.

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