Introduction

Disciplining the Sinful: A Gendered Lived Religion

The gossip surrounding Content Mason and Peter Wood had circulated for years. Many thought the young widow Mason would quickly remarry. Instead, she found company with the already-married Mr. Wood. Juicy gossip surrounding their relationship turned into serious accusations once Peter's wife conspicuously left town after the birth of Content's second illegitimate child. Content realized that they had to get away. So she packed what she could from her father's house, pocketed some money, and fled with Peter. Along with all of her hurried thoughts on abandoning her home, she must have conceded that life could take unexpected turns. Thirteen years prior, in 1679, the twenty-year-old Content was just beginning her married life and settling in as a goodwife in the Massachusetts Bay town of Dorchester. Unfortunately, her husband died after only three years of marriage, leaving Content a young widow with two little children. She must have had suitors over the years, but no single man could win her hand in marriage. Rumors started to spread about exactly where her heart wandered. Things got worse when Content and Peter's wife, Abigail, both delivered sons only ten days apart, in the spring of 1688. Not until a few years later, though, with the birth of Content's second illegitimate baby, did things come to a head. That's when Abigail Wood finally left Peter and moved out of Dorchester. While mere town gossip was insufficient to mount church disciplinary procedures, this turn of events was all the evidence needed. It was part of the responsibility of Puritan congregations to reprimand their members for their sins. And so, on a hot summer Sabbath in 1692, the Dorchester

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congregation at Meeting House Hill excommunicated the widow Mason for her "great wickedness."[1]

Content's story exemplifies the many complications of daily lived experience in Puritan New England and how Puritans created a disciplinary process to correct wayward members. This book examines church disciplinary cases such as Content's to explore how these practices impacted men, women, and Puritanism itself. If Dorchester did not excommunicate the widow Mason, who knew what could happen to its community? Excommunicating the sinful Mason would protect the community from jeopardizing the good fortune God bestowed upon it. The people could not risk God's wrath; after all, they were supposed to be a model of godly society. Puritans believed that if the church did not recover or "purge out" the sinners, the sinner could "infect" the whole community, whereupon God could send down his wrath on the town in judgment.[2] Sin had to be eradicated.

Church discipline was key to maintaining godliness. Laymen, the male members of the congregation, were charged with enforcing church discipline instead of putting it in the hands of ministers. Puritans were skeptical of allowing ministers too much control, for fear of corruption or abuse of power. As part of the Protestant revolution, Puritans did not support hierarchy and were suspicious of centralized authority. Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, even though each congregation had local control, most churches in Massachusetts Bay followed similar standards for censuring their members.

Congregations censured men and women for a wide variety of sinful behaviors, including dishonoring the Sabbath, child or spousal abuse, lack of deference, immodesty, absence from church, stealing, false witness, cursing, contempt for church, idleness, witchcraft, entertaining sin, lying, slander, blasphemy, fraud, fornication, and drunkenness. Censure represented the only judgment or punishment a congregation could mete out to maintain the social order; they could not fine, jail, or execute a sinner. An accused sinner could be forgiven, found innocent, admonished, suspended from the Lord's Supper, or excommunicated. An admonishment, suspension, or excommunication would hang over the sinner until the congregation determined that the sinner had adequately confessed and repented.

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[1] *Records of the First Church at Dorchester in New England, 1636–1734* (Boston: George Ellis, 1981), 15.

[2] For a discussion of the roots of church discipline in European Puritanism, see Amy Nelson Burnett, "Church Discipline and Moral Reformation in the Thought of Martin Bucer," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXII (Fall 1991): 439–56; and Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *Church Courts and Church Disciplines* (London: John Murray, 1843).

Church discipline was the ecclesiastical process of monitoring behavior but also worked in conjunction with secular authorities. The church and the courts could charge an offender for the same sin, as Puritans believed civil authorities should also protect the godly way. Religious and civil leaders in New England shared ideals about Christian watchfulness, a civil government based on the word of God, and a system of censures and punishments for those who transgressed.[3] Being a "city on a hill" required vigilance.[4]

Americans have long been fascinated by the Puritans.[5] The study of New England Puritanism has gone from documenting the intellectual history of elites to examining the ordinary and the marginalized.[6] With the current scholarship exploring masculinity, femininity, and the construction of language, the Puritans still have more to teach. Examining how they coded language and developed ideas around gender reveals much about how they understood and altered their world. Exploring the Puritans through this lens will also help twenty-first-century students "read" gender in deeper ways, to acknowledge the real ways in which gender constructs and language impact our society, business, politics, and daily lived realities.

[3] David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History, University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 1, 122; Bruce C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635–1790* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 65; Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 239–40; Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 55–58. Erikson describes the relationship between church and state that "magistrates would act as a secular arm in the service of the church … while the ministers would provide the final authority for most questions related to long-range policy."

[4] See R. S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996). John Winthrop recorded his speech on the *Arabella*, describing the mission of the colony to be an example for all. "City on a hill" was his explanation of how Massachusetts Bay was supposed to be an example of a godly society for England. The leaders believed that they needed to show a corrupt England how a Christian society should operate. See also Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little Brown, 1958).

[5] See George Selement, *Keepers of the Vineyard: The Puritan Ministry and Collective Culture in Colonial New England* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 3. In his introduction, Selement details that over 1,000 pieces have been written about the Puritans since Perry Miller.

[6] For example, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: A Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); and Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living in the Margins in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

The Puritan movement was the result of English challenges to the Catholic Church. The English Reformation began in 1534, when King Henry VIII issued the Act of Supremacy, which severed ties with the Catholic Church and proclaimed the king as the head of the Church of England. However, the Church of England retained many of the Catholic rituals and ceremonies. Once Henry VIII had the Bible translated into English, laypeople had access to its teachings, and some began calling for further reform. When Queen Mary ascended to the throne in 1553, she briefly returned Catholicism to England, executing Protestants and forcing the reformers to flee. When "Bloody Mary" died in 1558, the Protestant Queen Elizabeth succeeded her. The reformers returned to England, but to keep peace, Elizabeth limited changes to the Church of England.

It was during this time that critics coined the moniker "Puritan" to describe those reformers who wanted to rid the church of any sign of popish practices. English Puritans fought the corruption they saw in ceremonies, inept clergy, and open church membership. They believed the primary function of a church was to instruct people in the word of God as revealed in the scriptures. They countered the hierarchy of the bishops by arguing that individual congregations should have their own authority and choose their own ministers and elders. They decided that congregations should be joined together in an association of brotherly communion.[7] Puritans believed in the congregational way of church membership, which required individuals to have a conversion experience before they became full members, or visible saints. They affirmed that discipline was central to enforcing their virtuous standards. However, they did not arrive with a clear vision of how to institutionalize their religious expression. Different forms of Puritanism competed for primacy as they worked through how to establish and run a godly society.

In 1630 Puritans began migrating to New England in order to put their ideas into practice. Each congregation formed their own covenant, or social contract, that bound individuals together. A town's covenant firmly established its commitment to follow God's law in all civic, religious, and private matters. All members who signed the covenant pledged themselves to the community. The godly community subsumed all individual piety and service for the greater good.

A recent scholarly debate has revolved around the name "Puritan." At the time, critics belittling the movement developed the label "Puritans"

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[7] Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 12.

because of its call for a pure church. In the early seventeenth century, elite ministers who helped define the movement called themselves the "United Brethren," which formed a union between the Presbyterians and the "Congregational way."[8] Yet the average brother or sister of the movement would not have referred to themselves as part of the "United Brethren." That term more aptly describes clerical ideology and development. Puritans referred to themselves simply as Christians, or the "godly." Historian Theodore Dwight Bozeman argues that the term Puritan should be used to describe this religious movement. He explains that the term "illustrates an obsessive trait of the quest for further reformation: a hunger for purity."[9] Bozeman emphasizes that Boston's famed Puritan minister, John Cotton, celebrated "the name of Puritans as the name of purity" in his writing.[10] Historian Charles Cohen is also in favor of the term, as Puritan describes "the people who looked with distress on the condition of their church and who covenanted together in groups of self-professed godly souls to reform what they considered an intolerable string of abuses."[11] Cohen asserts that the term Puritan is useful because it describes a "hotter sort" of Protestant: they were more zealous and determined than some of their counterparts. Part of the Reformed orthodoxy, this particular movement would get lost among the other religious groups if historians simply referred to them as Protestants or Reformed Protestants. Cohen argues that we "cannot lump together all English Protestantism." Protestant religious movements may have shared a certain set of beliefs, but they differed on how to interpret and implement these beliefs.[12]

In seventeenth-century Puritan writing, men and women expressed the centrality of their spiritual beliefs. The first female poet published in the colonies, Anne Bradstreet, illuminated many of the Puritan concepts familiar in American history:

> My soul, rejoice thou in thy God,
> Boast of Him all the day,
> Walk in His law, and kiss His rod
> Cleave close to Him always …

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[8] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana, or the Ecclesiastical History of New England*, vol. I. 2 vols. (Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1855), 272.

[9] Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 3.

[10] Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 214.

[11] Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

[12] Cohen, *God's Caress*, 7.

> Thy tears shall all be dried up,
> Thy sorrows all shall fly,
> Thy sins shall ne'er be summoned up
> Nor come in memory.
>
> Then shall I know what Thou hast done
> For me, unworthy me,
> And praise Thee shall ev'n as I ought
> For wonders that I see.
>
> Base world, I trample on thy face,
> Thy glory I despise,
> No gain I find in ought below,
> For God hath made me wise.
>
> Come Jesus quickly, Blessed Lord.
> Thy face when shall I see?
> O let me count each hour a day
> 'Till I dissolved be.
>
> *Anne Bradstreet ("Meditation," no date)*

Bradstreet rejected worldly interests for the promise of heavenly rewards and expressed her unworthiness of the favors God bestowed on her. She pined for the day her soul would reunite with God. Like her Puritan sisters and brothers, Bradstreet expressed a spiritual energy and commitment that would come to define the first three generations in New England.

Despite a common set of beliefs and principles expressed in Puritan theology and covenants, Puritans themselves were not of one religious mind that emanated from the clergy. In practice, Puritans understood religion in diverse ways that combined clerical and popular thinking.[13] Disagreements surfaced over membership, voting, and baptism, among other things. Towns and congregations developed some patterns and practices that differed from others, yet the versions of this movement that maintained religious authority over most of New England for three generations shared more in common than not. Because of their similarities, comparing their disciplinary actions makes it possible to see gendered patterns.

As Puritans founded New England, they also brought with them an unsettled gender system created by a changing European religious and cultural landscape. New ideas of spiritual equality, a spiritualized

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[13] See David D. Hall, "Narrating Puritanism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. D. G. Hart and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70.

household, and marriage and family had the potential to undermine traditional authority.[14] Thus, they began their holy experiment with an untried religious prescript for running a commonwealth and a gender system challenged by the same religious and cultural energies that led to the Reformation. The lack of entrenched social institutions, combined with New World surroundings, led to family structures that loosened restrictions on women and tempered masculinity. This new world demanded more from both men and women. It required partners to handle business affairs, wives to run households and barter wares, and mothers to tend to neighbors and educate their children in moral virtue. Men had to head their families, run their farms and businesses, and safeguard their communities and churches. Puritanism mandated a tempered, sober, family-centered man, which conflicted with a more traditional masculinity of power and virility. It was a complex, changing gender system with the opportunity to significantly alter gender roles.[15]

[14] Historians debate whether the new ideas of marriage and a spiritualized household gave women more power in the home or increased patriarchal authority. For a discussion of the concept of a spiritualized household and new ideas about marriage, see Margo Todd, "Humanists, Puritans, and the Spiritualized Household," *Church History* 49 (March 1980): 18–34; Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). For a discussion of the notion of spiritual equality in Protestant thought, see E. Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985); Mary Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theory," *Signs* 11, no. 4 (1986): 735–39; and Kathleen M. Davies, "The Sacred Condition of Equality: How Original Were Puritan Doctrines of Marriage?" *Social History* 2, no. 5 (1977): 563–79.

[15] Radical Protestant groups, such as Quakers, embraced the notion of spiritual equality and gave women access to leadership roles and power in the church. Puritan women did not gain such formal powers. See Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly* 3, no. 5, Special Issue: Women and Religion (1978): 233–59; Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Marilyn Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Not all radical Protestant groups enabled women to take equal roles in the church or social life. For a discussion of an Anabaptist group, the Hutterites, see Wes Harrison, "The Role of Women in Anabaptist Thought and Practice: The Hutterite Experience of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXIII, no. 1 (1992): 49–69.

Puritan theology added fuel to the contested gender fires with the radical Protestant ideas of a feminized spirituality and all souls being equal.[16] In striving to create a godly social order, New England ministers preached a doctrine of piety and communal devotion for all its members to follow equally. The concept of spiritual equality led Puritans to have the same requirements for men and women regarding church membership, baptism, admittance to the Lord's Supper, conversion, and church attendance. Yet laymen's ideas about gender influenced the "lived" religion experienced by men and women. Disciplinary cases reinforced a gendered piety, as laymen controlled censures and did not necessarily conform to the mandates of a feminized religion.

This study responds to several currents in the recent scholarship on Puritans. First, as scholars argue, there was not a single "Puritan mind"; rather, Puritanism varied, in that the daily "lived religion" of men and women differed from theological edicts, but it was also a gendered lived religion.[17] Second, this study explores the implications of the choices Puritans made in transforming doctrinal ideas into practices of community. Feminized spirituality had the potential to undermine patriarchal authority and gender roles, but church disciplinary practices reinforced a more traditional masculinity and femininity that compromised such potential. Third, this study identifies early contributions to the construction of the ideology of separate spheres. Historians first cited its emergence in the nineteenth century; however, recent studies find evidence in the eighteenth century. This study finds roots of separate spheres in the seventeenth-century meetinghouse, as laymen created a church disciplinary process that reinforced male religiosity through public service rather than internal piety and reinforced women's ties to the church and its private realm.

My interest in how gender influenced this Puritan experience focused my research on church records. I was already persuaded by historian David Hall, who argued that the daily "lived" religion of the common

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[16] Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75.

[17] David Hall's concept of a "daily lived religion" was a response to the foundational history of Puritan theology by Perry Miller, who argued that Puritans were of one religious mind based on the theology of ministers. See Miller, *The New England Mind*; Hall, "Narrating Puritanism"; and David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also Selement, *Keepers of the Vineyard*. Selement argues that while there were differences between intellectuals and the common Puritan, they shared collective mentalities; he argues that the clergy interacted daily with their congregations and were more influential in their thinking than Hall suggests.

Puritan subtly differed from the Puritanism preached by ministers.[18] It stood to reason, then, that men and women would fashion different ideas of religion based on ideas of gender. I started exploring church disciplinary records after reading this brief suggestion in the citation notes to *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750*, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich: "There is much more to be learned about the activities of women in churches from a close examination of membership patterns and disciplinary action."[19] These records offered vignettes of ordinary people's lives that inspired me to learn about their behaviors, struggles, transgressions, and choices. Disciplinary cases offer a unique opportunity to learn how congregations treated sinful men and women and, in turn, how they defined behavior for godly men and women.

Building on the work of historians examining Puritanism as a feminized religion, I wanted to further explore how the disciplinary process impacted not only women, but men as well. If we view women as the normative Puritan, what does that mean for laymen? What did it mean to be a man in this new world? Did men conform to and/or challenge ministerial expectations?[20] This study also draws upon Elizabeth Reis's *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, which analyzes Puritan feminized spirituality. It also supports Reis's argument that women focused more on their sinful natures, whereas men tended to ignore their souls and focus on their actions. Reis found this in literature and witchcraft trials; I corroborate this further in disciplinary records. Reis argues that men were able to accept the feminized spirituality because of the distinctions Puritans made between the body and the soul. In their writing, Puritans split body and soul into distinct identities, describing the inferiority of the body, which houses the superior soul. A body decays, but a soul can live forever in the kingdom of heaven. Such literature described the souls of both men and women as feminine.[21] Reis asserts that the distinctions between the body and the soul permitted a greater gender fluidity. Men could safely adopt a feminized spirituality in private, while maintaining the outward masculinity of their bodies.

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[18] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 15.

[19] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 281.

[20] For explanation of gender history, see Scott, "Gender," 1053–75.

[21] Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93–120.

In turn, women found status within the church because, Reis argues, Puritans constructed a gendered ideology and society that made women closer to God and Satan. Women could be both more virtuous and more sinful: their feminine nature could make them humble before God, but their weakness could also make them succumb to the Devil. Church disciplinary records show that laymen were not "comfortable" with their feminized inner piety, at least publicly. In censure cases, men rejected the feminized language of confession and adopted a masculine language that distanced themselves from their feminine souls; yet women and ministers continued to identify with and describe the attributes of the feminized soul. In the public space of church censures, men rejected the tenets of feminized spirituality, which distanced them from the church and ultimately compromised the potential Puritanism had to allow more gender fluidity.

Over the past several decades, historians have agreed that there was greater gender fluidity than previously thought in the seventeenth century, but debates continue about when and how gender lines became more rigid. Historians began to see colonial women's history not as some kind of "dark age" but as a set of gains and losses. In *Good Wives*, Ulrich explained women's history as a "convoluted and sometimes tangled embroidery of loss and gain, accommodation and resistance."[22] Cornelia Hughes Dayton illustrates the "loss" in compelling terms, describing how women enjoyed relative authority and power in the seventeenth century, only to lose such status in the early eighteenth century. Mary Beth Norton finds a similar trajectory for women, although she argues that they retained power later into the century than Dayton asserts.[23] Norton

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[22] Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 240; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women before the Bar: Gender, Law and Society in Connecticut, 1639–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 10.

[23] Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Founding of Early American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 3–4, 11–24. Norton describes New England as a Filmerian system, based on the philosophy of Robert Filmer: the family and state were analogous institutions. The hierarchy in the family – father, mother, children – resembled the hierarchy of the state. Thus, a woman had power as a mother, as a wife, and as a widow. The Filmerian system opened up power for women, but it also limited it. Wives submitted to the authority of their husbands. Yet, in their roles in informal public space, women had power and authority. Norton distinguishes between informal and formal public space and explains that the public/private dichotomy did not have the same meaning it would in the nineteenth century. It was only when the public/private split began to occur by the end of the eighteenth century that women became marginalized and lost ground. Norton and Dayton disagree over the timeline, but both assert that women lost public authority.