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Of Wives and Witches: The Duality of Female Deviance in Puritan Moral Theology

Just under a month after the first women were accused of witchcraft in Salem, Samuel Willard delivered the first of his “Two Sermons on Women and the Devil” in Boston; the second followed a month later on April 19th. Although neither sermon directly addresses the witchcraft crisis, or even uses the word “witch,” the text nonetheless characterizes a distinctly female variety of sinfulness and corruption, one which speaks to a deep mistrust of women that was rooted in moral theology and which must have influenced the proceedings of the 1692 Witch Trials. Willard’s criticism of female sinfulness, however, is not limited to the behaviors traditionally associated with deviance, such as outspokenness and promiscuity. Willard also implicates female expressions of authority, especially those which came from the spiritual power of the female soul, as deviant and devilish behaviors. The Puritan wife, then, could be just as dangerous to male power structures as the witch because of her potential to undermine men’s authority through a distinctly feminine spirituality. Willard’s theological construction of female sinfulness shows that Puritan society mistrusted not only women who rebelled *against* the social order, but also those who held too much power *within* it. This expanded definition of female deviance (deviance through rebellion and deviance through authority) can be applied to the Salem Witchcraft Crisis in order to suggest reasons why some women who did not meet the traditional criteria for ‘witch’ were nonetheless accused and convicted in 1692.

It is not controversial to say that Samuel Willard does not express a high opinion of women in his “Two Sermons on Women and the Devil” (which will be treated for the purposes of this paper as one continuous document), but what is less immediately clear is why the moral mistrust

of women was so deeply ingrained in Puritan theology. Though primarily on the sins of Eve and her contribution to the woes of mankind, the document does not so much recount the sins of one woman as it does “the Woman,”¹ that is, all women. It is important to note that Willard refers to Eve as “woman” (as in womankind) more frequently than he calls her by name. Thus, Eve was not the only sinner of her gender, but merely the first, the one who put “a special curse” on all members of her sex and doomed them all to similar sinfulness.² All Puritan women had to bear the yoke that Eve’s sin placed upon them—even newborn baby girls were seen as inherently disobedient because of their metaphorical complicity, via their gender, in original sin.³ In addition, careful study of Willard’s rhetoric reveals that women were not only the cause of the fall of man, but also the origin and best example of a multitude of the most grievous of sins.

After recounting the story of Eve and the apple, Willard states, “Learn hence, *what are the sins which make us most like the devil and let it put us upon hating of them.*”⁴ The operative word in this sentence is “hence,” which refers naturally to the argument which preceded it—an account of the sins of “woman” and specifically, Eve. In this way, Willard establishes woman (womankind) as the case study through which the sins he believes are most devilish can be studied: pride, discontent, malice, lying, blasphemy, seduction, and murder.⁵ And by establishing Eve, the first woman, as the first transgressor in these many sins, Willard genders the sins themselves: they were first committed by woman, and therefore these crimes are essentially female in nature. Having established women as the first and guiltiest of sinners, it is to these sins which Willard then turns in order to construct a dual, and ultimately deadly, Puritan femininity—one in which wives, the godliest of Puritan women, could be just as dangerous to the moral order as witches.

To understand Willard’s construction of (and ultimately warning about) Puritan femininity, it is first necessary to establish what it meant to be a virtuous or a deviant woman in Puritan New

England more broadly. As Martha Saxton writes, Puritan women in the 17th century were expected to embody the qualities of “modesty, timidity, obedience to authority, and self-doubt;”⁶ they were expected to be silent and submissive in church, attentive to the needs of their fathers, and later, their husbands, and the only moral authority they could hope to achieve was in assisting in enforcing adherence to these conventions on the parts of others.⁷ Men oversaw all aspects of women’s lives—even their conversion, a highly personal spiritual experience, was controlled and directed by men.⁸ Taking on these roles, and cheerfully so, was the work of a virtuous woman. To be a deviant woman, then, was to behave to the contrary of these values: to be combative, disobedient, independent, sexually promiscuous, discontent, and melancholy.⁹

All of the sins Willard describes as being essentially feminine fit into one or more of these categories as well, suggesting that his theological construction of both deviant and virtuous femininity was built reciprocally with cultural values, taking from and giving to the social norms which dictated acceptable behavior for Puritan women. Willard’s description of the sin of “discontent,” for example, is explicitly directed at women who dared to question the gender norms which Puritans believed were ordained by God: “There is discontent at the state and place God set us in, thinking it beneath us and below those endowments and abilities that we have. We think our selves better than some whom God hath preferred to us, either in honour, esteem, preferment, or wealth, and now we murmur and fret.”¹⁰ Although this sin could include envious and discontent men, as evidenced by the use of the neutral collective pronoun ‘we,’ the fact remains that Willard chose to include this in the list of sins inherited by women from Eve after her failed attempt to resist temptation, thus implicating women more strongly than men in the sin of discontent, and in sinfulness more broadly.

The argument for the greater susceptibility of Puritan women to sinfulness was based on theology and fundamentally grounded in the way Puritans viewed the soul itself. As Elizabeth Reis notes, the Puritans viewed the soul as essentially feminine and thought that a strong physical body would shelter the soul from both holy and diabolical advances.¹¹ And because women were typically physically weaker than men, this gendered soul meant that the Puritan woman could be, paradoxically, “closer both to God and to Satan.”¹² In this vein, Willard suggests that it is not those on the margins of society, but rather the women “whose relation and affection is most near and intimate”—wives—who the Devil can use “mo[st] dangerously, in alluring [us] to the commission of sin.”¹³ Strikingly, Willard also describes Eve’s turn to Satan not as a demonic pact but rather as the normal Puritan subjugation a woman should have to her husband in a black mirror: a woman ceased to subject herself to the will of her husband as “a meet help unto [him]” and instead “subject[s] her understanding and will to the report of Satan.”¹⁴ Thus, even women who seemed godly, devoted to their husbands, and observant of social and moral codes could be covertly involved in a diabolical conspiracy.

Not only was it possible for a seemingly pure and godly wife to covertly be a servant of Satan and thus threaten the Puritan religious order, but Willard implicitly indicates as well that women who were not religiously subversive in this traditional sense could nonetheless fall within his constructed category of the female deviant. To do this, in condemning the sin of discontent, Willard also implicates a traditionally feminine activity, gossip, through criticism of those whose discontent leads them to “murmur and fret”. As Saxton notes, women could achieve the highest degree of moral authority when they acted as advocates of the system, for example, by shaming those who did not act within the boundaries of the Puritan moral code through gossip.¹⁵ Could not a woman’s “murmuring” about, for example, the fine clothes another community member wore be

an indictment of the sin of pride this woman saw in her community rather than a sign of the gossipers' envious and sinful nature? Willard does not seem to think so. That Willard sees gossip not as moral enforcement but rather as social deviance and religious transgression suggests that it was not just rebellion and combativeness that could earn a woman a reputation as deviant, but assumption of moral or spiritual authority as well. As Saxton puts it: "Women had to criticise, suggest, and direct others--particularly men--with extreme caution as Puritan men were deeply alarmed when women presumed to judge them."¹⁶ Thus, assuming a position of moral authority could be just as dangerous for a Puritan woman as assuming a position of moral disobedience—the latter threatened Puritan social structure, the former threatened the authority of men to determine and direct this structure. The qualities which have traditionally been associated with female deviance in Puritan New England, such as outspokenness and sexual license, were not the only ways in which a woman could threaten the male-dominated social and religious order. Although a woman who rebelled against the moral order and a woman who advocated strongly for it seem initially to have little in common, both sets of behaviors share the fact that they represent a deviation from the Puritan ideal of timid and subservient femininity. Whether by rebelling against or achieving power within the male social and spiritual order, both positions ultimately represented two sides of the same coin: a woman defying and subverting the role assigned to her because of her gender. Following the legacy of Eve herself, these women (either as rebels or advocates) could be seen as serving the purposes of Satan—just one signature in the devil's book away from the crime of witchcraft.

In the context of Willard's dual femininity, in which female power and authority were seen just as dangerously as female rebellion, the accusations and subsequent convictions of some of the women who do not fit the traditional definition of 'witch' become more explicable. In order to put

Willard's theological femininity more explicitly in the context of witchcraft, this paper will analyze the examinations of Bridget Bishop and Rebecca Nurse to show that the former could be an example of deviance through rebellion while the latter may be considered an example of deviance through power and authority. I begin with Bridget Bishop, the first witch executed as part of the Salem Witchcraft Crisis. Bridget Bishop was known in the community for being "poor, quarrelsome, and suspicious," she had been previously accused (but not convicted) of witchcraft in 1679, and had previously appeared in court accused of domestic violence.¹⁷ In short, as Emerson Baker puts it, "Bishop fit everyone's idea of a witch."¹⁸ Bishop's defiant and difficult personality—or at least what observers perceived and recorded as such—is also evident in the record of her examination. "I know not what a witch is," states Bishop defiantly, in response to the leading questions being asked of her by Judge Hathorne.¹⁹ It seems unrealistic that a Puritan woman could have reached adulthood without knowledge of witches. Taken together with the fact that Bridget denies knowledge of other things she almost certainly did know—that others had confessed to witchcraft and even who her accusers were—it seems likely that Bishop's claims to ignorance were made more out of defiance than out of genuine lack of knowledge.²⁰ That Bishop's primary mode of defense would be claiming ignorance rather than defending her good character, and that no one spoke in Bishop's defense, also support reading her as combative, socially marginal, and discontent. It is easy to see how a woman who was often in court, had few friends, and spoke defiantly to figures of male authority would be seen as a threat to Puritan social order: Bridget Bishop thus fits perfectly into the first of Willard's two categories of female deviance, rebellion. And Bishop paid dearly for her deviance: she was executed as a witch on June 10th, 1692.

On the other hand, women who were in many ways the precise opposites of Bridget Bishop were also accused and convicted of witchcraft; the most well-known of these women is Rebecca Nurse. Thirteen years Bishop's senior (at age seventy-three), Nurse was frail, nearly deaf, and, perhaps most importantly, "a highly respected member of Salem Town Church."²¹ Nurse also drew a powerful wave of support from her friends and neighbors in the form of a petition with thirty-nine signatures which attested to her innocence and good character.²² That she could draw such support from her community, even in a time where opposition to the trials was deeply unpopular and even dangerous, shows that Nurse must have been a powerful and respected figure in the Salem community. Her claim to moral authority is also evident in the record of her examination: in response to an accusation that she felt no sympathy for the afflicted, Nurse interrupted Judge Hathorne and stated, "You do not know my heart."²³ In the context of Willard's construction of deviance through authority, this statement becomes even more powerful and provocative: not only is she directly contradicting a powerful male authority figure, but she is also doing so in a way that suggests she knows better than he. Taken together with her high "religious, economic, and political standing,"²⁴ Nurse's defiance of authority suggests that her accusation may have been more than just what Baker calls a sign "that almost no one in the colony was safe [from accusation]."²⁵ Rather, it seems that Nurse represented the other half of the duality of female deviance described by Samuel Willard: if Bridget Bishop was dangerous because she rebelled against the Puritan social order, then Rebecca Nurse was dangerous because she held too much power within it. Perhaps she was convicted of witchcraft by the male jury in part because of the implicit and subconscious threat she posed to the authority the jury members possessed merely by being members of the dominant gender. What else but witchcraft could explain such power and influence in the hands of a woman

who, as the jury would have heard weekly in church, should always have deferred to the men who were her moral and spiritual superiors?

Although not all of the witches accused and convicted at Salem were women, Puritan notions of gender and their connection to witchcraft are nonetheless significant determiners of the trials and their aftermath. But the gendered construction of the Salem witch was not born in a vacuum; it had its origins in both the theological and the social notions of gender that existed in Puritan New England more broadly. This paper has attempted to analyze one small piece of the social-theological construction of femininity, and female deviance more specifically, and bring it into the context of witchcraft in order to understand more completely how gendered notions of power and rebellion may have contributed to the events in Salem. Samuel Willard constructed a theologically based female deviance that could take different and sometimes contradictory forms: a deviance that could take the form of being too godly or not godly enough, too rebellious or too authoritative—too much a saint or too much a witch. That women could be considered deviant for both rebellion against and authority within the male power structure of Puritan New England suggests that many women who were convicted may have been targeted because they dared act outside the timid and subservient role that Puritan men believed God had ordained for the inheritors of Eve. And like the first woman herself, Puritan women had the power to be both more diabolical and more divine than their male counterparts—a notion which, for sixteen Salem women, ultimately proved deadly.

Appendix on Methodologies

Literary Formalism

Much attention is paid in historiography to the Puritan construction of a witch, a concept which is obviously of great relevance to the study of the Salem Witchcraft Crisis. But given that many of the accused witches were women, I felt that a more detailed look not just at Puritan witches, but at Puritan femininity in a broader theological context could provide great insight into the mechanisms behind the witchcraft crisis. Samuel Willard's "Two Sermons on Women and the Devil" is a perfect example of Puritan femininity examined in a witchcraft context but not focused on witchcraft exclusively, and for this reason I selected this document as a focus for study. Detailed analysis of a single document lends itself well to a literary formalist approach; literary formalism holds that the meaning of a document does not exist only in its social/cultural/historical context, but also in the language, tone, and formal and rhetorical devices used to construct the arguments of the text. Thus, close reading allowed me to closely examine features of the text that may normally be overlooked when analyzing multiple documents or analyzing texts exclusively through their historical contexts. Literary formalism allows the text to speak for itself: rhetorical devices, specific choice in words, and the tone of the text are brought to the fore, thus lending credibility and agency to the writer of the text by allowing his or her words to resonate with minimal interference from contextualization.

Although Willard's text was written as a sermon and not as a literary work, formalism is still an insightful way to approach the text because, through close reading, it highlights implicit and subtextual meanings, and these meanings proved instrumental in understanding the mechanisms through which Puritan society converted women into witches. The duality of femininity which lies just below the surface in Willard's "Two Sermons" is a thread that runs

through the entire tapestry of Puritan theology and social life—and it is at its most noticeable when contexts are cast aside and the text is analyzed as a literary work rather than an historical document. This is not to say that an historical approach to document analysis is not valuable; obviously documents must be put in their historical contexts to be fully understood. The value of literary formalism lies not in replacing historical analysis, but rather supplementing it, allowing formal devices and language choices to work with historical context to create the most complete picture possible of the meaning of a work. This is what I have attempted in this paper: to use a close reading of Willard's "Two Sermons," supplemented by close readings of sections of other primary sources, in conjunction with an historical approach guided by the principles of the other methodology I selected, Women's History, to construct a more complete picture of female deviance in Puritan New England.

Women's History

Although Samuel Willard likely did not set out to define and complicate notions of female deviancy in his "Two Sermons," but rather to describe and condemn sinners, both male and female, the close reading of the text does suggest that female deviancy was an important component of Puritan moral theology and thus deserves greater attention. The duality of female potential as man's greatest source of support or his greatest source of temptation led me to a more detailed analysis of Puritan femininity, a goal which I felt would be best served by the disciplinary methodology of Women's History. Women's History developed alongside social history in the 1970s as a result of the lack of attention to women and women's issues in the traditional narratives of political history, and its methodological approach is to analyze the ways in which patriarchal structures, both in history and in historiography, have impacted the female experience and the narratives written about it. The relevance of this methodology to the Salem Witchcraft Crisis is

clear: although not all of the accused witches in 1692 were women, that the majority were and that this is one of the few episodes in the history of this period in which women play a dominant role in the source material suggests that further study of femininity and femaleness would illuminate the mechanisms behind this dark episode in American history.

Women's History as a methodology allowed me to take the narrative of female experience outside its usual context of deviance and witchcraft and thus suggest ways in which women were both powerless and powerful in Puritan New England more generally. By analyzing which female behaviors were valued and revered and which were feared or condemned, I was able to identify a narrative of female deviance which included not only traditionally subversive behaviors, but also the power women held because of the theological construction of the godly feminine soul. This feminine duality shows that women were not only threatening when they were rebelling *against* the male social order, but also when they were gaining too much power *within* it. Thus, both rebellion and authority were essential components of what it meant to be a witch in Puritan New England. But without a focus on the experiences and roles of women in more than just the immediate context of the Salem witch crisis, the diverse, complex, and surprising components of Puritan femininity are often marginalized by a male narrative. This patriarchal narrative willingly acknowledges the complex inner lives and motives of men like Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard but tends to treat the women accused as witches as either genuinely deviant or genuinely innocent and nonthreatening, without pausing to consider that female deviance may sometimes have been a perceived excess of authority rather than the traditional qualities of 'witchness.' Women's History brings these narratives back into focus, allowing me to complicate the Puritan concept of female deviance and thus suggest other potential reasons why certain women who didn't fit into the traditional definition of 'witch' were nonetheless accused of witchcraft in Salem.

Endnotes

¹ Samuel Willard, "Two Sermons on Women and the Devil" in *Witches of the Atlantic World* ed. Elaine Breslaw (New York: New York University, 2000), 300-302, 300.

² *Ibid.*, 301.

³ Martha Saxton, *Being Good: Women's Moral Values in Early America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 24.

⁴ Willard, 301. Italics original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 301. These are Willard's original terms for these sins, which appear in Italics in his original text.

⁶ Saxton, *Being Good*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-60. Saxton makes the interesting argument that many Puritan women, as a result of their discontent with the position they were allotted in society, were suffering from what would now be diagnosed as clinical depression. Although difficult to prove, her argument suggests another category for perceived deviance that has not been considered by other historians of the Witchcraft Crisis, one that could be used to explain the accusation of women who were less visibly deviant than the traditionally combative and conflict-inducing witch.

¹⁰ Willard, 301.

¹¹ Elizabeth Reis, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul" in *Witches of the Atlantic World* ed. Elaine Breslaw (New York: New York University, 2000), 322-329, 324.

¹² *Ibid.*, 329.

¹³ Willard, 302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

¹⁵ Saxton, *Being Good*, 5.

¹⁶ Martha Saxton, "Bearing the Burden? Puritan Wives" in *History Today* 44, no. 10 (10, 1994): 28. <http://ezproxy.ups.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.ups.edu/docview/202810001?accountid=1627>.

¹⁷ Emerson Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University, 2016), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ezekiel Cheevers, "Examination of Bridget Bishop" in *Witches of the Atlantic World* ed. Elaine Breslaw (New York: New York University, 2000), 387-388, 388.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 387-388. Bishop denies knowledge of her accusers by claiming that she "did never see these persons before" and denies having one piece or another of knowledge a total of nine times in Cheever's account of her examination.

²¹ Baker, 31-32.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ Samuel Parris, "Examination of Rebecca Nurse" in *Witches of the Atlantic World* ed. Elaine Breslaw (New York: New York University, 2000), 381-384, 382.

²⁴ Baker, 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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