

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Begotten and Beguiled:

Puritan Women's Communities and Gender Policing in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial New  
England

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## **Abstract**

In 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial New England, gender was intrinsically tied to power. For women in Puritan communities, their marginal power came in their ability to properly wield their piety; feminine traits that defined them as models of their gender, upstanding church members, and charitable neighbors. An intersecting identity of high socioeconomic status, favorable reputation, and community type allowed some women to exert a higher level of authority than their lower-class, more religiously policed counterparts. Women created communities for themselves separate from men and exerted control over each other within, supporting patriarchal standards and regulating female behavior. By analyzing the different experiences of Puritan women of various economic backgrounds, this paper will argue that women exercised authority in their communities by utilizing the traits of femininity and piety enforced by patriarchy to their advantage and weeding out those who did not conform to these expectations.

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## Introduction

When Anne Hibbens questioned the work of her carpenters in her Massachusetts home in 1640, she likely did not expect the ensuing drama to unfold over a period of 15 years and culminate with her execution by hanging. As a woman of relatively high social status, Hibbens may have perceived her social class a protection against her crime. The crime in question was simple: a usurpation of her female gender by questioning the authority of a man. By the time of Hibbens' execution in 1656, little of the original accusation remained in the final trial transcript.<sup>1</sup> She had been thoroughly transformed by repeated accusations of gender blasphemy escalated from her original crime to produce an individual who could only be cleansed by death. Hibbens' downfall stemmed from the erosion of her reputation and a perceived loss of significant markers of Puritan femininity: piety and submission to male authority.

Anne Hutchinson's crime posed a much greater threat to colonial order than Hibbens', yet Hutchinson kept her life. Hutchinson's challenges to the Puritan religious institution were perceived by colonial leaders as real threats to the order of Puritan society, yet she was not executed. Religion dictated every major function, from men's and women's roles, economic activities, laws, crimes, and punishments. What was considered a crime, or unacceptable behavior in Puritan society were heavily gendered. Hutchinson's challenge to Puritan dogma was twofold: she argued that previous minister's interpretations were misguided, and she did so as a woman. Although her ministry threatened the very religious foundations that Puritan society was built off of, she ultimately did not face a punishment of death. Unlike Hibbens, favorable social

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<sup>1</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly: Gender, Punishment, and Religion in Early America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 130.

factors allowed Hutchinson to avoid the gallows. Her status as the daughter of a minister, relatively wealthy background, and the support of the many congregants who followed her pressured colonial leaders to spare her life but destroy her influence over the colonists.<sup>2</sup> Through her banishment, Puritan men were able to preserve their authority and dismantle a community that empowered women's involvement in the church; an institution by which women were obligated to operate under but not could influence.

The cases of Hibbens and Hutchinson are extensively documented due to their high socioeconomic status, but their experiences alone cannot fully represent the extent to which female behavior was regulated in Puritan society. Gender policing also manifested from upsets in the routines and workdays of low-class women. Quarrels between neighbors, perceived slights, and failure at domestic tasks were just some potential situations for a woman's femininity to be scrutinized. Although these upsets may be perceived as inconsequential to a modern observer, they were significant enough in Puritan society to be noted in colonial court records.

Puritan ideas of sex and gender were intrinsically tied to religion, and a discussion of Puritan social functions, crime, and punishment is not complete without its context. One of the major tenants of feminine expectation was piety. Piety is defined in this paper as the expectation of women to attend church and town meetings regularly, uphold the teachings of Puritanism and the Bible in their daily lives, and act in accordance with the domestic gender expectations laid out by Puritan patriarchy. This extended to action as well. Women were expected to be passive, humble, and not call attention to themselves. In trials, this created roadblocks for women to properly defend themselves. Women were defined by their 'nature' as a the 'weaker sex' in body

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Passion of Anne Hutchinson: An Extraordinary Woman, The Puritan Patriarchs, and the World They Made and Lost*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 10.

and mind. To Puritans, men and women's souls existed on equal ground, but women's weak constitutions and their descent from Eve, the original sinner, placed them in a position of susceptibility to Satan.<sup>3</sup> As such, women were perceived as always on the precipice of possession and required piety to guard themselves against their sinful nature. This explains why accusations of crimes towards women escalated to witchcraft: their initial wrongdoing was a sign of their sinful nature no longer being contained. Ideology that asserted women were vessels of the devil were not excluded to Puritan men, and it was often women who were the most boisterous in regulating their own piety as well as that of their fellow women.

Puritan gender ideology was often paradoxical. Piety was equated with womanhood, as was a susceptibility to sin and the devil. Women were vessels of new life and vessels of Satan. They were open to God and vulnerable to sin. Femininity was equated to Godliness and a signifier of spiritual weakness. A recurring theme observed in women's accusations towards each other is the significant loss of the accused's femininity. By intention or not, this paradox kept women locked into roles in the private domestic sphere as women internalized Biblical and patriarchal rhetoric. This paradoxical thinking is reflective of a worldview that views men and women as compliments of each other, forcing different roles and associations with each gender to provide a sense of order and preserve male authority. Women's communities centered around their inherent connection with domesticity and piety, the major demarcations of a feminine Puritan woman. These communities allowed them to exert power and influence, regulating the piety of their fellow women to preserve Godly order in their society. By analyzing sources from upper class women and synthesizing them with sources from lower class women, this paper

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 104.

seeks to understand the ways in which women operated under a deep-rooted, religious patriarchy, held each other to its standards, and challenged its authority over them.

## Historiography and Methodology

Scholarship in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century focused primarily on analysis of the Salem Witch Trials, with many works focusing on the social and psychological causes of the witchcraft hysteria. These interpretations are heavily influenced by the “Salem” of their time, the growing paranoia surrounding communism in the West. Richard Weisman’s work *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Massachusetts* notes sociological and political turmoil in Salem, emphasizing religion in Puritan culture as the source of witchcraft anxieties.<sup>4</sup> Very little attention was paid to the broader swathe of New England Puritanism, and instead focused primarily on the Massachusetts bay and the late 17<sup>th</sup> century incidences of witchcraft.

The influence of feminist theory manifests in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably with Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s book *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. Ulrich evaluates New England women’s roles and private female community within broader Puritan communities. Ulrich designates specific groups of women in New England: upper class housewives, middle class landowners, low class renters, and indentures.<sup>5</sup> Through various accounts, *Goodwives* serve to analyze how these women interacted with each other and were influenced by social rules based on Biblical teaching; the Rule of Industry, Charity, and Modesty.<sup>6</sup> Ulrich argues that despite patriarchal

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Massachusetts*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, (New York: N.Y. Knopf, 1982), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Laurel Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 59.

teachings and influence, women struggled to maintain their piety and were confronted with anxiety regarding their self-expression, gender identity, and sexuality.

Interpretations continued to incorporate feminist theory and gender-centered investigations into the nature of Puritan witchcraft accusations. Carol F. Karlson's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, examines the social position of accused women and argues that those suspected of witchcraft often operated on the fringes of society. Low class women, widows, and those who challenged patriarchal authority through inheritance or influence in the community were most likely to be targeted.<sup>7</sup> Karlson's thesis asserts that witchcraft accusations were focused on the control of female power and the preservation of gender roles within Puritan society.<sup>8</sup>

Historical interpretations expanded to include a more detailed look at the relationship between gender and religion in Puritan society as the crux of patriarchal institutions and witchcraft accusations. Elizabeth Reis's *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* explores Puritan religious interpretations of femininity to explain the proclivity of women to accuse other women of witchcraft and to even suspect themselves of devilish sin.<sup>9</sup> Reis's work explicitly discards early 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of hysteria and revenge to argue that patriarchal interpretations of women as "weak vessels" susceptible to the devil were, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Carol F. Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 233.

<sup>8</sup> Carol F. Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 151.

minds of Puritans, a truth, and thus the nature of women had to be regulated to promote holy order.<sup>10</sup>

Meticulous examination of the religious aspect of Puritan society is also explored in Jane Kamensky's *The Colonial Mosaic: American Women 1600-1700*. Kamensky examines the lives, duties and expectations of women in early colonial societies in relation to religious gender expectations. Despite how women were targeted for debauchery and heresy, congregations were mostly made up of women.<sup>11</sup> Kamensky argues that women felt they needed to uphold Biblical standards in response to the decline of male religious devotion. This is perhaps why so many women were quick to accuse each other of 'suspicious' activity, as they felt they were part of the vanguard keeping the devil at bay.<sup>12</sup> Female piety was not equal to female power, and despite their efforts to remain pious, women were still suspect by default due to the very nature of their identity and sex as female.<sup>13</sup>

Social class, race, gender, and the nature of patriarchal hierarchy characterizes *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* by Kathleen Brown. Brown takes a fresh look at the relationship between race and gender in colonial society, arguing that masculine anxieties in response to female agency in the New World urged colonial governments to bolster their authority by regulating the personal lives of colonists based on race, gender, and sexuality. Despite attempts to regulate behavior, economic

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Kamensky, *The Colonial Mosaic: American Women 1600-1700*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1995, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Kamensky, *The Colonial Mosaic*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Kamensky, *The Colonial Mosaic*, 95.

opportunity, and personal freedom, women and people of color continued to challenge expectation through the creation of their own cultures, subgroups, and networks of support.<sup>14</sup>

The focus on patriarchy and the shaping of gender ideology in Puritan society continued in the late 1990s with Mary Beth Norton's *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. Norton examines the distinct methods by which men and women separated their communities in colonial America. Women's communities were built around the church and reproduction, two concepts in the lives of women that were inextricably tied together.<sup>15</sup> Women provided support for each other in these times, but also regulated each other's actions as part of the female in-group, reinforcing standards of gendered power that dictated women operate in private and men in public.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the ideological domination of interpretations that cited witchcraft suspects as those most marginalized, works like that of Edward Beaver challenged ideas of Puritan patriarchy and power. Beaver's article "Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community" cites that witchcraft accusations tended to target women at the center of communities. These accusations were not sporadic but tended to be part of a larger pattern of dismantling the lives and reputations of women who held power in early communities.<sup>17</sup> Beaver engages in primary source analysis that puts the onus of accusation and punishment on the

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<sup>14</sup>Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*, First edition, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 230.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 239.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Beaver, "Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community," (*Journal of Social History*, vol. 35, No. 4, 2002), 955-988, 975.

accused woman and argues that men's perceptions of women as witches were influenced by female action.<sup>18</sup> While Beaver conclusions may not be supported by the larger body of work on the topic, his findings contribute to the greater idea of the policing of female behavior perpetrated by men and women alike to reinforce patriarchal standards of femininity and womanhood.

Scholars continued to build off the idea of separate sphere in relation to the function of Puritan society. *Separated By Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* by Norton examines women's roles in public and private and how they used the tools available to them like gossip to influence public affairs. Norton argues that Anglo-American way of life excluded women as a group from the public realm, and the processes by which 'private' and domestic' became synonymous.<sup>19</sup> Norton examines the accounts of colonial men and women to understand how 'public' became coded as masculine and 'private' as feminine.<sup>20</sup> Women weaponized private methods of power, such as slander as gossip to sway colonial politics and societal operations.

Recent works use the findings of Ulrich, Norton, and Karlson to build on new interpretations of Puritan law intersecting with the previous theories of gender and religion. Monica D. Fitzgerald's *Puritans Behaving Badly: Gender, Punishment, and Religion in Early America* explores the Puritan disciplinary practices of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to analyze how women and men were affected in a society which placed heavy importance on piety in relation to female

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Beaver, "Witchcraft, Female Aggression," 973.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Separated By Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Separated By Their Sex*, 174.

gender. Men's confessions to crimes shaped their interpretations of a masculine idea of Puritanism, while women's confessions reflected ideas of female piety and a "feminized religion" as church congregations continued to skew female.<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald argues that the censuring of men and women from different crimes created a "gendered lived religion" that serves as the roots of the separate-spheres ideology.<sup>22</sup>

*The Passion of Anne Hutchinson: An Extraordinary Woman, The Puritan Patriarchs, and the World They Made and Lost* by Marilyn J. Westerkamp takes two main approaches to its thesis. The first of which explores Anne Hutchinson's life personally, focusing on her connection with the church through her father and subsequent high status in Massachusetts's society. The second approach analyzes Puritan society through cultural and feminist theory to identify the factors that allowed for Hutchinson's disposal.<sup>23</sup> Westerkamp's chronology of Hutchinson's prominence in Puritan religious teaching and subsequent banishment from the colony reveals a nuanced look at Puritan women's self-perceptions: which despite challenges to authority remained largely in line with Puritan gender ideology.<sup>24</sup>

Historians researching Puritan society after 1980 shared an application of feminist theory and emphasis on the lives of women contextualized by religious patriarchy. Emphasis is placed on examining women's behavior in domestic and private realms based on public court records and transcripts. Research for this paper focuses on women's spaces as areas for the enforcement of patriarchal standards. Primary sources consist of women's court records and transcripts

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<sup>21</sup>Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 234.

derived mostly from the Massachusetts colony, selected from mentions in secondary literature and expanded upon with sources selected from a Connecticut collection. This was to gain a more well-rounded understanding of the breadth of Puritan New England. The subjects of these records come from both high and low socioeconomic statuses to illustrate a more complete image of Puritan society.

### **Feminine Wickedness**

Puritan gender ideology was deep-rooted in Biblical understandings of gender and power. The patriarchal system of Puritan social life was justified by religious scripture and teaching, which equated women as descendants of Eve, the first sinner and origin of suffering in the world. Like Eve, women were believed to be susceptible to beguiling from sin and the devil, more so than their male counterparts. It is evident how this line of thinking often resulted in a guilty verdict for accused women as the very nature of their gender marked them guilty by default. Men were not the sole authority upholding the ideology of female wickedness. Women were often cited as accusers in witchcraft cases, likely due to their proximity in domestic and religious female communities. The reason for women's proclivity to accuse their fellow women of sin is multifaceted with historians postulating jealousy or non-conformity as the likely causes for female accusation. While these reasons were the intention of some women, the prevalence of religion in Puritan life cannot be ignored. To the Puritan mind, devil and sin were real, explainable, reliable, and equivalent to scientific method and empirical reasoning.<sup>25</sup> For a woman to accuse another of sin and expose them to the consequences of an accusation; the trial, the othering, and in some cases, the execution, was to safeguard the entirety of the community from

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 3.

Satan's influence. As the inherent sin of women was widely preached and utilized in witchcraft accusations, internalized feelings of wickedness were common for many women, who often felt they existed on the precipice of losing control of their inhibitions, ever on the verge of falling into sin and abiding by temptation.

Puritan ideas of gender and sin were rooted in patriarchal ideas of female nature. Women existed in a "double-bind" of wickedness, vulnerable to Satan in both body and soul.<sup>26</sup> While women's souls were not considered more evil than men's, a woman's soul was perceived as passive and open to either God or Satan, whomever she allowed within herself to be persuaded by. Since women's bodies were understood to be weaker than men's physically, this meant their physicality could not properly shield their souls from the devil's influence. To this end, Puritan's interpreted that women needed to be constantly monitored to deter them from Satan's temptation and align them on a path of piety and righteousness.

Unlike the tenants of modern court cases, cases that brought a woman's behavior into question had little concern with a coherent timeline or a modern conception of concrete evidence. Any testimony of a woman's perceived wickedness was deemed viable as it was an indicator of her hidden nature revealing itself. The inner wickedness of a woman was present from the moment of her birth, allowing testimonies even years old to be used as concrete evidence in court. Elizabeth Clauson's case illustrates how accusations from years before the trial were still considered viable pieces of evidence to the court, with little scrutiny paid to the accuracy of the accusers' memory. Clauson, a Connecticut housewife, was ousted by her neighbor Mary Newman. Newman's account details an altercation that occurred two years before

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 94.

Clauson was brought to trial, in which “angry words passed between them.”<sup>27</sup> The next day, three of Newman’s sheep were dead, leading Newman to believe that Clauson had cursed her livestock in retaliation. The amount of time passed between the incident and the trial is moot to the Connecticut court. Instead of questioning the circumstances of the their argument and the timeframe, Newman’s accusation served to prove to the court that Clauson’s sinful behavior and supposed witchcraft had an outstanding history within her lifetime. The Clauson case also illustrates the Puritan idea of the supernatural world as real and tangible. For Puritans, events like the sudden death of cattle, failing of crops, sickness, or upsets in the workday were explainable through religious ideas of Sin and the devil. Disastrous events were clear indications of a neighbor’s involvement with witchcraft.

Women had a greater tendency than men to equate typical sins with the more egregious sin of witchcraft.<sup>28</sup> Their interpretation of these lesser sins as evidence of demonic affiliation displays Puritan women’s internalization of feminine wickedness rhetoric. When combined with the voices of other women repeating the same beliefs, women were hyper-aware of their behavior as it related to their supposed wickedness. When accused of witchcraft, this inclination to conflate ordinary sin with Satan’s influence resulted in women confessing to witchcraft. Rebecca Eames lamented the pressure she felt to confess, stating that her confession was “hurried out of my senses by the afflicted persons...”<sup>29</sup> Eames’ confession also reveals her self-concept of inner wickedness, mentioning her “own wicked heart.”<sup>30</sup> Despite Eames admitting her

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<sup>27</sup> “The Case of Elizabeth Clauson, 1692.” document no. 18-24, Samuel Wylls Papers, *Connecticut State Library*, <https://cslib.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15019coll10/id/140/rec/5>

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> “No. 044 Rebecca Eames,” Salem Witchcraft Papers, 1692, <https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n44.html>.

<sup>30</sup> “No. 044 Rebecca Eames,” Salem Witchcraft Papers, 1692.

confession to witchcraft was false, she did not deny her inherent sinfulness. In the case of Alice Lake, she claimed she “owed nothing of the crime laid to her charge” and refused to confess to witchcraft.<sup>31</sup> However, Lake still believed that she housed inner wickedness, citing that “she had when a single woman play'd the harlot.”<sup>32</sup> Despite not believing herself guilty of witchcraft under the terms she had been accused, Lake felt that she should be punished due to her past sin of fornication. To Lake, that sin was enough to make her a witch and warrant punishment. The language of the accused in trial records reveals Puritan women’s beliefs of their proclivity for wickedness due to their gender. When either refusing to confess or giving into pressure to confess, women continued to believe that despite their innocence of the current charge, a past transgression was enough to make them guilty regardless.

In a seemingly counter-intuitive strategy, some women confessed to accusations of witchcraft to avoid execution. Abigail Hobbs confessed, “I will speak the truth... I have been very wicked... I hope I shall be better, and God will keep me.”<sup>33</sup> Hobbs’ confession evoked tenets of model female behavior; humility, a refusal to lie, and willingness to return to a life of piety. By committing herself back to a life of righteousness, Hobbs’s confession transformed her story into one of redemption, and she was able to avoid the gallows.<sup>34</sup> Elinor Glover confessed similarly, “she hoped that there was something of repentance begun in her which God would owe.”<sup>35</sup> There was a fine line for how women’s sincere confessions would be received by the

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<sup>31</sup> John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry in the Nature of Witchcraft*, (Boston, 1702), 18.

<sup>32</sup> John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> “No. 069 Abigail Hobbs,” Salem Witchcraft Papers, 1692, <https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n69.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *Ancient Town Records: New Haven Town Records, 1662-1684* (New Haven, 1919), 2:8-9

court. Berthia Stanly's confession attempted to evoke a redemptive image as she acknowledged that "God had of late made her to see from his word ye greatness of her sin against God."<sup>36</sup> Despite this, Stanly's confession was considered by the court to be "somewhat hopeful yet not so full, nor convincing..."<sup>37</sup> The court's negative interpretation of Stanly's attempt at pious humility stems from her language. Stanly does not explicitly state her need for redemption or a return to God, only that God helped her recognize her sin. In her confession, she takes a passive role, not actively seeking redemption from sin. This was likely an attempt to remain within the expectation of passivity that was expected for women. In this case, Stanly's passivity was perceived not as that of a proper Godly woman, but as inaction. Her confession indicated to the court that she was not fully ready to repent, and thus she was not fully free from the devil's influence. Stanly's confession reveals that women could not always rely on alignment with Puritan gender expectation to escape punishment, as their gender demarcated them guilty by default. Gaining the sympathy of the court was not straightforward and women had to operate within the gendered context of their case to deliver a convincing confession.

One of the most captivating components of Puritan gender ideology was its deep internalization by the female population. The case of indentured servant Mary Johnson was detailed by Cotton Mather, who documented her in his work *Magnalia Christi Americana* which sought to chronicle mostly religious events in the Massachusetts colony. Mather recounts in particular Johnson's ardent confession to the accusation of witchcraft. She confessed that the devil had "did for her many services," including carrying out the ashes from the hearth,

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<sup>36</sup> Beverly First Church Records, (*Essex Institute Historical Collections* 35, 1898), 188, 193.

<sup>37</sup> Beverly First Church Records, 188, 193.

accompanying her in driving the hogs to field, and sexual satisfaction.<sup>38</sup> Johnson's claims of interacting with the devil demonstrate her internalization of feminine wickedness. It is unclear exactly how to decipher Johnson's experience, but it is likely her discontent with her occupation as an indentured servant and the shame associated with that feeling was interpreted by her as demonic influence. One of the most critical components of Puritan femininity was skill and comfortability with domestic tasks. Mather describes Johnson's "discontent, and wishing for the devil to take this and that."<sup>39</sup> This line explicitly reveals Johnson's discomfort with her social and occupational position as an indenture. In failing to be content with the work asked of her, Johnson rejects the domestic aspect of femininity associated with her occupation. In her belief, her negative thoughts about her station were a manifestation of the devil's influence over her. Evident in Johnson's case is also an inclination to avoid questioning hierarchy. To Johnson, her displeasure with her work is not due to the system of indentured servitude being inherently exploitative and exhausting, but due to demonic influence. Her discontent, though not explicitly expressed through actions like abandoning her work, was a challenge to patriarchal power in her mind alone. Johnson's case is crucial not only to understanding the degree to which Puritan women internalized ideas of their susceptibility to wickedness, but also how displeasure with domestic roles lead to women questioning their own femininity.

The connection between a susceptibility to sin and wickedness and femininity contextualizes the strict behavioral standards women imposed on themselves and others. Puritan women operated under expanded definitions of witchcraft and sin, hyper-aware of their behavior

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<sup>38</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana or, the Ecclesiastical History of New-England: From Its First Planting in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord, 1698, in Seven Books*, Vol. 2. (Hartford, Silas Andrus & Son, 1853), 396.

<sup>39</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 396.

and past transgressions. Due to their connection with Eve and the Original Sin, women existed in a precarious situation of guilt by default, their very nature as women the explanation for their proclivity to sin. The language of women's confessions and testimonies exposed the degree to which women understood themselves to be sinful. While women may not have admitted guilt to the crime with which they were charged, shame for a past sin often resulted in a woman confessing to witchcraft. This reveals how Puritan women thought of themselves, never truly innocent, faultless, or without sin in need of punishment.

### **Domestic Expectation**

Female interaction and feminine expectation revolved around domestic skill. Three guidelines based off Biblical interpretation served to define a Godly woman; Modesty, Industry, and Charity.<sup>40</sup> Modesty and Industry are the most influential and observable in the historical record. Modesty encapsulated everything from the literal behavior of Modesty such as speaking humbly to expectations for dress. Modest dress was that which reflected one's social class and refrained from calling attention to the body, both in a sexual sense and authoritative sense.<sup>41</sup> Industry referred to the performance of domestic work in accordance to the feminine standards of speed and skill. In essence, feminine expectation marked the line between those who were a benefit to the community and those who posed a threat to it. A woman who proved to be a lacking farmer, seamstress, or cook threatened the survival of her family and by extension the order of the community itself. As the Bible deemed successful women successful homemakers and wives, a woman who failed in this role also failed in the eyes of the church and God. In the

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<sup>40</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 59.

absence of their husbands, women were permitted to act as ‘deputy husbands.’<sup>42</sup> Some of these ‘masculine’ duties allowed to wives were the conducting of business affairs, dealing with contractors, and managing finances. Performance of these tasks under the delegation of their husband was not a cause for concern, but women who strayed too far into the realm of duties deemed unfit for women to perform ran the risk of ostracization from the female community and the colonial community at large.

Oftentimes domestic disputes incorporated the policing of other signifiers of femininity and womanhood. The standards for womanhood seemed to transcend age for young girls, who were seen as their gender first. The case of Hanah Hutchinson<sup>43</sup> is one example of this phenomenon. Finishing wash at a female neighbor’s home named Chandler, Hanah then “pretended to go home at noon.”<sup>44</sup> Upon witnessing a dispute between a housewife and another neighbor’s son, Hanah returned to Chandler’s home in fright. At her arrival, Chandler immediately ran to converse with the neighbors who had witnessed the altercation. Discovering Hanah lied about the details of the situation, Chandler reprimanded her, calling Hanah a “lying woman.”<sup>45</sup> In failing to go home and finish the rest of her chores and for lying about it, Hanah broke both the Rule of Industry and Rule of Modesty. Hanah’s female neighbors held her accountable to the expectations of a woman, not a child.<sup>46</sup> Hanah’s behavior was an indicator of lost femininity, and thus a loss of reputation to the women of the community. Hanah

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<sup>42</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> No immediate relation to Anne Hutchinson.

<sup>44</sup> *Records and Files of the Quarterly Court of Essex County, Massachusetts*. Vol. III, (Salem: Essex Institute, 1913), 275.

<sup>45</sup> *Records and Files*, Vol. III, 275.

<sup>46</sup> Though her age is unknown, given her behavior in the record it is likely that Hanah is a child.

Hutchinson's unbecoming behavior was potentially threatening to the order of domesticity present amongst the female neighbors.

Chandler's reaction cannot go unaddressed when analyzing this instance of female behavior policing. Her immediate reaction to the confrontation with the young girl was to consult her fellow neighbors on what they had heard and seen. This instinct on the part of Chandler is evident of the power that the female community had over each other. Before passing judgment on her own observations, Chandler found it necessary to gather the assessments to her peers. With her mother not present, it fell to Chandler to reprimand Hanah for her transgression against her gender. This demonstrates a sense of community, but also the idea that it was up to each woman to ensure that her peers were behaving in the manner that was expected of them.

Katherine Harrison's witchcraft trial reveals the degree to which details from the female community could be used in court against the accused. Mary Olcott's testimony in Harrison's case is synonymous with housewife drama and feminine expectation. Olcott's account details a conversation between Harrison and her servant Elizabeth Simon about marriages in the community. Simon expressed to Harrison that "she should have bene married to William Chapman."<sup>47</sup> Simon questioning her marriage implies a deep dissatisfaction with the match, and her view of it as a mistake on the part of the patriarchs who arranged it. Her confessing this worry to her mistress highlights the connection between the two, a bond that many women who shared hours of a workday likely had. Olcott's testimony of Harrison's response is simple, "Elizabeth should be married to one named Simon."<sup>48</sup> By affirming Simon's marriage as

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<sup>47</sup> "The Case of Katherine Harrison, 1668: Testimony of Mary Olcott," document no. 16-17, Samuel Wyls Papers, *Connecticut State Library*, <https://cslib.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15019coll10/id/150/rec/6>.

<sup>48</sup> "The Case of Katherine Harrison, 1668," document no. 16-17, Samuel Wyls Papers.

accurate, Harrison demonstrates her support of the marriage, and of the decisions of the patriarchal authority. Olcott's testimony affirms Harrison as loyal and passive, raising her femininity while denigrating Simon's. In essence, Simon is used as an example of the type of woman the court should be prosecuting, a woman who questions her role as a wife and the decisions made for her by her male elders. Though her testimony supports Harrison, Olcott's account simultaneously paints an image of Simon as failing to uphold feminine expectation.

Domestic policing intersected with social class expectations and stereotypes. One account details the interaction between Elizabeth Hunt, a middle-class housewife, and Sarah Roper, an indentured servant. While attending church service, Hunt's child dropped the bodkin<sup>49</sup> Hunt had given him to quiet him during the service. Hunt saw Roper "put down her hand" and "then the floor being clear... suspecting that the said Sara Roper had taken it up."<sup>50</sup> Roper picked up Hunt's bodkin and had it delivered to Hunt's home the day after. The matter was then spread throughout the community, with several community members, mostly women, testifying in defense of whether the item was taken by Roper with the intent of theft.<sup>51</sup> This mischaracterization of Roper as a thief is reflective of Hunt's middle-class anxieties brought to light: that Roper and Hunt have more in common with their economic status than Hunt does to the colonial upper-class. The case escalated when Hunt accused Roper of "picking her teeth with the bodkin."<sup>52</sup> Not only does this statement demonstrate a use of slander on the part of Hunt, but

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<sup>49</sup> Though there are many variations of the tool depending on the craft, it is likely this bodkin was a large blunt needle used for sewing heavy fabrics.

<sup>50</sup> *Records and Files of the Quarterly Court of Essex County, Massachusetts*. Vol. IV, (Salem: Essex Institute, 1913), 240.

<sup>51</sup> *Records and Files*, Vol. IV, 241.

<sup>52</sup> *Records and Files*, Vol. IV, 242.

also expresses Hunt's, and other middle-class women's, idea of the vulgar lower-class woman. In accusing Roper of fouling a domestic tool, Hunt directly attacks Roper's domestic fluency, and by extension her femininity. As femininity was the crux by which women asserted their piety and godliness, such an accusation may have resulted in serious consequences for Roper's reputation, although details after the initial case are left out of the historical record.

The Rule of Modesty prevented women like Hunt from open confrontation with their peers.<sup>53</sup> The Rule of Modesty in itself is likely why women relied on slander as tactic, anything directly confrontational would be obscene, an affront to the expectation of the humble disposition of a godly woman. Hunt was aware of the gender expectations that she needed to uphold to keep her own reputation clean. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich postulates that the setting on the confrontation between Roper and Hunt may have shaped the resulting case. She argues that "since the meetinghouse was the one public arena open to them, it is hardly surprising that they acted out their search for positions there."<sup>54</sup> The meetinghouse existed a physical space that very openly demonstrated gender but also an indicated class. As the upper and middle classes sat together, the meetinghouse was a place where women like Hunt could revel in the perceived clout their social standing brought them.<sup>55</sup> Though they may have been unable to effectively sway the men in their lives, middle and upper-class women could exercise power over the women below them in class ranking.

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<sup>53</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives*, 66.

The dynamic between social class and the idea of the accused existing on the fringes of Puritan society is challenged by the cases of elite women like Anne Hibbens.<sup>56</sup> As part of her role as deputy husband, Hibbens conducted business affairs in her home under the permission of her husband. The trouble came when Hibbens found issue with a carpenter's job in her home, questioning the quality of their work and then issuing a suit for the uncompleted work. Her crime was twofold: she questioned the authority of a man and slandered his professional reputation, and usurped her place as deputy husband by displaying authority that should have been reserved to him alone. In challenging this gendered order, Hibbens also directly challenged the word of God that dictated man above woman and her subservient to his authority.<sup>57</sup> Challenging male authority and therefore religious authority, Hibbens' case transformed into one of blasphemy and witchcraft. What followed the initial proceedings was a long and tenuous campaign of character assassination. Like other witchcraft trials, men of the community began to accuse her further, claiming that her behavior when the church elder's preached was "shows so much contempt."<sup>58</sup> It can be inferred from the men of the town gossiping about Hibbens that women were also engaging in similar chatter. This gossiping likely isolated Hibbens from the community she could most trust, putting her in a fragile state of social ostracization. Most ironically, the more Hibbens tried to explain her reasoning, the more she pinned the verdict of 'guilty' onto herself. By advocating for herself and providing reason, she merely proved what the court and community had already accused her of: an obstinate, lying, unfeminine, and therefore, devilish

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<sup>56</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly*, 119.

<sup>57</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly*, 125.

<sup>58</sup> Monica D. Fitzgerald, *Puritans Behaving Badly*, 121.

woman. Her self-advocacy was perceived as immodest, and with this rule of Puritan femininity thoroughly broken in the eyes of the court, Hibbens was subsequently condemned for witchcraft.

Recurring in each account of community policing is the loss of femininity for the accused. Femininity and its expectations were synonymous with Godly character for women. The upholding of each gender's specific standards was to do so in according with the intent of God. To break this balance was to challenge spiritual and colonial authority. Since Puritan dogma situated women as constantly on the verge of spiritual attack by due to the nature of their weak souls, the instinct to keep their behavior, and others, in check was strong for Puritan women. As colonial New England was a patriarchal society, gender standards for women could be enforced by men and women alike, but women could not enforce male gender expectations on men. This power imbalance may have contributed to a stronger impulse for ambitious women to gain whatever influence they could in the female community. Again, Puritan patriarchy and society was synonymous with religion.

Despite being a place where Puritan women could exercise a relative amount of freedom over their work and demonstrate their skill, the realm of domesticity was constantly overseen by other women in the community. Domesticity was suited to a 'feminine disposition' while simultaneously promoting and policing that expected disposition of femininity. The Three Rules of Industry, Charity, and Modesty were constantly checked in women's communities by and for women of all ages, with Modesty and Industry the most heavily checked. Contextualized with Puritan gender ideology and the internalization of women's susceptibility to the devil's influence, domestic communities were places where religious patriarchy was enforced rather than challenged. Women may have been relatively free in their separate sphere, but they were not free from patriarchal and religious expectations, the practice of which was vital for a woman

to remain in the ingroup, and in the worst cases, avoid the gallows. As seen in the case of Anne Hibbens, women were effectively shut out of reason and self-advocacy, the engagement of which only served to condemn a woman further. Although the modern observer may wish to imagine Puritan women's private communities as escapes; hubs of proto feminist thought and action, in reality women held themselves and others to theocratic and patriarchal standards.

### **Pious Disposition**

The church stood as the greatest authority in the lives of all Puritans but held a special function for women: supplying the idea of inherent female wickedness and its remedy through religious teaching. At its peak in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, women accounted for roughly three fourths of congregations in the Massachusetts colony.<sup>59</sup> Women may have felt their attendance of religious meetings and teachings was keeping wickedness at bay and serving to uphold the godly order of the colony.<sup>60</sup> While this reasoning has contributed to women's regular attendance of religious affairs, at the core of Puritan gender expectation was female piety: women's duty to uphold the word of God in their homes and teach Puritan values to their children. Due to their inherent wickedness from the Original Sin of Eve, women were expected to look to their husbands for spiritual guidance to salvation.<sup>61</sup> Despite exercising more willingness to participate in church activities and demonstrate piety through their domestic roles than their male counterparts, women were defaulted to their supposed inherent wickedness, second class in their devotion to God as dictated by their 'nature.' Although women found community in church spaces, the teachings

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<sup>59</sup> Jane Kamensky, *The Colonial Mosaic*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Jane Kamensky, *The Colonial Mosaic*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 72.

themselves were given to and dominated by men and patriarchal rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> Challenges to male domination in religious teaching, like that of Anne Hutchinson, demonstrate women's willingness to participate in a sphere of Puritan life that held a deep influence over them. Hutchinson's success as an influential preacher can be traced not only to her knowledge of religious text, skill, and charisma but also her female congregants' interests in hearing scripture from their fellow female community member.

Similar to other aspects of life as a Puritan woman, engagement with scripture and religious teaching was necessary, but had to be approached in a manner befitting their gender. Women were expected to attend church services, but they could not engage with the discussion of the religious teaching. In trials, which were deeply connected to the church, women were barred from reading their own testimonials. In the case of Elizabeth Clauson, Mary Newman's account is written in the third person and signed by a man, Johnathan Selleck.<sup>63</sup> While town elders did not disregard information that came from a woman for a case, reading her own testimony would have been a usurpation of Modesty. Church functioned in a similar manner for Puritan women. They were not allowed to voice their questions in the public setting of the congregation and had to approach church elders privately.<sup>64</sup> Women had to take a passive role in salvation. Husbands were responsible for leading their wives to spiritual redemption, and it was the duty of the wife to submit to her husband's religious authority.<sup>65</sup> Like many aspects of Puritan gender expectation for women, women had to walk a fine line of passivity and

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<sup>62</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> "The Case of Elizabeth Clauson, 1692," document no. 18-24, Samuel Wyllys Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 124.

<sup>65</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 72.

involvement. They were expected to be well learned in the Bible, but that learning could not be facilitated by themselves alone, lest they appear to be overstepping their husbands' authority and their place.

Despite the expectation to remain passive and merely observant of Puritan doctrine, many Puritan women found themselves disillusioned with aspects of spiritual teachings and protested them. Some dissenters took issue with the dominant theological interpretations of the Puritan male authority which declared that good works were representations of God's grace, and thus good works were the key salvation and redemption.<sup>66</sup> One woman, Joanna Sill, found that "though she did not neglect duties, yet she found no presence of God there as at other times."<sup>67</sup> Sill's admission of this lack of God's grace through good works reveals the extent to which women examined their own relationships with God and religion. Though men and husbands may have been intended to be their spiritual guides, women took an active role in questioning their relationships with God, examining the dominant Puritan theological interpretations, and thus challenging Puritan male religious authority. Anne Hutchinson's relationship with scripture and theological interpretation extended beyond personal examination to cultivate a religious audience and following. As the daughter of a wealthy preacher, Hutchinson was informally educated and well-versed in Puritan scripture.<sup>68</sup> Hutchinson's familial background and social status enabled her to analyze the dominant mode of Puritanism and come to her own interpretations. While many women, like Sill, were able to be religiously introspective, Hutchinson's background

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<sup>66</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 136.

<sup>67</sup> Selement and Wooley, *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 32.

created the unique circumstance for a woman to actively engage in formal theological study and analysis.

Hutchinson's meetings started out mundane enough for the Puritan male elite to not take notice. As the early gatherings consisted mostly of women, Hutchinson's preaching could easily have been interpreted as feminine assistance with household and spiritual affairs.<sup>69</sup> Hutchinson even argued this angle in her trial, claiming that "clear rule in Titus that the elder women should instruct the younger..."<sup>70</sup> Hutchinson's reputation and standing as a pious, charismatic, and respected housewife was the draw for her female congregants and the deterrent for suspicion by the Puritan male elite. If Hutchinson's religious meetings had remained with a female-only audience, it is likely that the male elite would never have taken notice of the theological dissent brewing in Hutchinson's home. Trouble came for Hutchinson when her preaching surpassed her gender when men began to attend.<sup>71</sup> In a fashion similar to Hibbens, Hutchinson's religious knowledge and skill in speaking were perceived by the court not as evidence of her capability, but qualities that condemned her further in the eyes of the court.

Hutchinson's trial unveils not only her professionalism and knowledge of religious text, but also the unease of Puritan male authority with her influence on the Boston congregation. Governor John Winthrop states that Hutchinson "seduce many honest persons that are called to those meetings..."<sup>72</sup> Present in this line from Winthrop is not only the complete dismissal of

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<sup>69</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 142.

<sup>70</sup> "The Massachusetts Bay Colony Case against Anne Hutchinson, 1637," From Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. II, 1767, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936, [https://www.norton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch02\\_03.htm](https://www.norton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch02_03.htm).

<sup>71</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 142.

<sup>72</sup> "The Massachusetts Bay Colony Case," *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. II, 1767.

Hutchinson's charisma and skill with religious text, but a sexual, tempestuous characterization of Hutchinson's methods for gathering an audience. Contextualized with the presence of men at Hutchinson's meetings, the use of the word "seduce" implies a direct sexual condemnation from Winthrop on the part of Hutchinson as a temptress, not a minister. The line also signifies an attempt of the court to ruin Hutchinson's reputation, to transform her to a woman they would feel more comfortable with condemning; sinful, depraved, unfaithful. Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley exposes the extent to which the Puritan male elite is concerned with the subject matter of Hutchinson's preaching, stating "Hutchinson hath so forestalled the minds of many by their resort to her meeting that now she hath a potent party in the country."<sup>73</sup> The elite were right to be concerned with Hutchinson's influence over the congregation. Around 75 percent of the Boston elite were affiliated with "Hutchisonsian" belief, including the most influential merchants and craftsmen of the colony.<sup>74</sup> While concern with Hutchinson preaching an alternative form of Puritanism to an influential audience caused the male authority to charge her and put her on trial, it was this very same congregation that provided the social pressure necessary to deter the court from executing Hutchinson. Knowing they could not execute her without facing backlash from the public, the Puritan male religious authority settled on instead destroying Hutchinson's authority over her congregation and thus her power in the colony. Banishing Hutchinson from the colony ceased her ministry and allowed the religious elite to gain back control, preserve relations with her congregation, and uphold the gendered power status-quo.

While Hutchinson's ideas may not have transcended to question the patriarchal status of Puritanism, her ministry in itself was a direct challenge to male authority and the limits by which

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<sup>73</sup> "The Massachusetts Bay Colony Case," *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. II, 1767.

<sup>74</sup> Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson*, 46.

men perceived women capable of religious thought. Although Hutchinson's trial resulted in her banishment and the end of her preaching, her fate was far more favorable than that of women who had committed lesser crimes in the face of Puritan male authority. Hutchinson's qualities as a model Puritan woman allowed her to escape a witchcraft conviction and the destruction of her reputation that was so frequent in similar cases. Despite her conformity to Puritan gender expectations and example as a extremely pious woman, these factors did not protect Hutchinson from accusation and scrutiny. The support of her elite congregation despite her gender was not only a direct challenge to Puritan conceptions of gender ideology and female passivity, but also a threat to the theological balance of the colony itself.

## **Conclusion**

Puritan gender policing transcended social class to effect women of various statuses and economic backgrounds. While social factors may have deviated for the accused, the one constant was gender, and a divergence from gender expectation. As evidenced by the cases of Hibbens and Hutchinson, several factors outside of social status such as conduct, social reputation, and piety meant the difference between life and death for an accused woman. Piety in particular was a powerful signifier of femininity, encompassing Puritan expectation for religious devotion and feminine behavior. Despite women's attempts to conform to these standards, no protections existed that could prevent a woman from accusation. A woman was suspect by the very nature of her gender as a woman. Since Puritan gender ideology was rooted in Biblical interpretations of Eve and the Original Sin, conformity with gender expectation was evident of a spiritually moral woman. Deviation from the norm in any capacity was grounds for surveillance from other women and in escalated cases, examination from the male religious elite. Puritan supernatural

belief allowed gender scrutiny to fester in communities. Women's surveillance of each other was viewed as a necessary measure to guard against Satan's influence in the broader Puritan community. As women internalized ideas regarding their inner wickedness, the same critical lens used to look inward at their behavior was turned outward to the rest of the female community. To this end, women's communities existed not as hubs of free expression separated from the dominant patriarchal society, but as areas for further gender scrutiny. As evidenced by cases like that of Roper and Hunt, women's spaces often served as the stage for ambitious women to assert their marginal power and influence over other women. In alignment with the paradoxical nature of Puritan gender ideology, these assertions of power had to be passive, and women had to operate within the confines of gender expectation to avoid turning the female community against them.

In each case of gender policing, this paper asserts that the accused suffered a loss of femininity in the eye of the accuser. Discontent with domesticity, straying from religious devotion, lack of humility, and use of assertive masculine speech or conduct were some of the gendered crimes evidenced in this paper that a woman could commit that would result in separation from the feminine in-group. Further research into the male community could yield a more accurate image of gender policing in Puritan communities broadly. The strict enforcement of religious Puritan gender expectation for women served to preserve male authority and keep women in positions of subservience. The strictness by which Puritans enforced femininity and masculinity is evidence of their belief that gendered order reflected a broader sense of order within the community. To question the order of gender expectation was to then question the commands of the Bible and God himself. Puritan women were unequivocally complicit in the preservation of religious patriarchy and feminine gender expectation. Religious entrenchment of

gender ideology coupled with a deep internalization of their own proclivity to sin resulted in a female population that never openly questioned the gendered status quo, only their own actions.

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