

Bożenna Chylińska

The Status of Women in the Social Theology of Early Puritan New England

Acta Philologica nr 49, 99-112

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Bożenna Chylińska

Uniwersytet Warszawski

The Status of Women in the Social Theology of Early Puritan New England

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the gendered discourse about women in early New England and how it contributed to shaping the female experience in the patriarchal Puritan society. The gendered discourse identified and assessed the role and position of seventeenth-century colonial American women, who recognized with silent acceptance their subordination to the male authority. Gendered language was used to articulate theories of hierarchy and obedience and thus to rationalize the New England social structure and order. Contemporary texts, which reiterated stereotypes about sexual and gendered behaviors, used social platform to demonstrate prejudiced views on the status of women.

Key words: gender, social theology, New England, Puritanism

The first English permanent settlement in North America, Jamestown, was founded in 1607 by males and it had lacked white female residents until the following decade. The absence of women in the initial period of the existence of the colony resulted from the fact that it had originally been planned to serve economic and military purposes. The early New England Puritan settlements, however, unlike the non-Puritan southern colonies, were established and settled both by males and females. The first Puritan women came to Massachusetts accompanied by their fathers and husbands. Puritan emigration in family groups was intentional, aiming at the foundation of a godly society which would serve as a model to the rest of the world. As economic survival was not the sole objective of the early Puritans, women's presence was noted at the earliest phase of the New England colonization. The most desired and expected female contribution to the establishment of the Puritan communities was the development of subsistence agriculture and, more significantly, the re-creation of the social and family structure, modeled after the English scheme.

Gender, beside race, economic status, age, and religion was one of the most important categories that determined the New England colonial past; it identified and assessed the role and position of seventeenth century Puritan American women who recognized with silent acceptance their inferior role, which was always to serve a particular man and to submit to the only authority in the family they knew, that is that of the husband and the father.

The Puritan females, like other New Englanders of the day, adopted a common seventeenth-century theory of power which rested on the fundamental principle of the father's dominance over his subordinates. Inevitably, such a theory, linked to religious belief as the rule of the all-pervasive system of social inequality, was ordained by God. Obedience and the resultant secondary position of women were not only a religious duty but a legal requirement. John Winthrop (1588–1649), the early New England colonial leader, in his exemplary 1630 *Arbella* civil sermon clearly explicated this gender-role theory and practice:

God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion. (*A Modell of Christian Charity* 7.31–48)

The fundamental virtues formulated for women by the New England Puritan moralists: Industry, Charity, Modesty, Religiosity, Meekness, Prudence, and Obedience, were the key words denoting not solely the idealized, occasionally abstract virtues of the colonial housewife; they above all proclaimed a broad scope of the strict female obligations, responsibilities, attitudes, and modes of conduct, conferred upon women within a specific context of ordinary life in a particular place and in the precisely determined time. Those moral fundamentals also provided clear ideas about what was suitable for a woman in her position. The most essential rules of female social mores: Industry, Charity, and Modesty, were perspicuously pronounced in Proverbs 31: “She toils at her work”; “She keeps her eye on the doings of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness”; “Like a ship laden with merchandise, she brings home food from far off.” Accordingly, in her efforts she strictly obeyed the virtue of industriousness required by her male-dominated community which preferred “productive” to “ornamental” women, and which praised submissiveness, rather than wit.

Gendered discourse, using gendered language to define social distinctions and to articulate theories of hierarchy, superiority, obedience, and subordination, became one of the fundamental ways defining individual identity and rationalizing the structure as well as the order of seventeenth-century New England society. The examination of contemporary texts clearly reveals appropriate gendered behavior in society, and marks a long list of the visible signs of gender identity and difference. The numerous conduct books and tracts on gender and sexuality, supported by sermons, claimed that properly feminine were those women who strictly conformed to theological requirements as well as expected roles and duties. Significantly, such hardened dictates about appropriate gendered roles and conservative views on the meaning of the notion of masculinity and femininity could have been motivated by the fundamental changes within seventeenth-century Western societies. Those changes, gradually revealing contradictory ways of thinking about gender and sexuality based on Christian theology, combined with medical science, the development of the theory of natural law, and the consequent philosophy, might have threatened the traditional and well-established Puritan social order.

The Bible taught that women were responsible for the original sin, hence, they were subject to men because of female natural inferiority and greater sinfulness (Genesis and St. Paul), and that woman's role was confined to the home (Proverbs 31). Man was

the rational “head,” a symbolic image of the political hierarchy and of the domestic patriarchal order in which woman was associated with irrational body, therefore, she should remain silent, subordinated, and confined to the domestic sphere on the grounds of three issues: her fallen nature, uncontrollable lust, and supposedly lesser reason. Physiology was used to justify woman’s unequal access to education, to procure the double sexual standard, and to generate her exclusion from politics. John Calvin’s interpretation of the Bible, emphasized in his sermons and commentaries, was widely employed in churches. His exegetical commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians heralded and continually repeated those unquestioned and unchallenged scriptures on women’s identity and social roles:

1 Corinthians [verses 11.7–12]

7. For a man [...] is the image and glory of God but the woman is the glory of the man. For it is a great honour that God hath appointed her to the man to be a companion and a helper of life, and hath **made her subject to him**, even as the body is a crown to her husband [Prov. 12.4], is true concerning the universal sex, if so be we respect the ordinance of God, which Paul commendeth here, teaching that the woman is therefore created that she may be the ornament of God.

11. Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. This is added partly to restrain the men from triumphing over the women: and partly to comfort the women, lest they should take their subjection in evil part. Mankind, saith he [St. Paul], hath the pre-eminence over womankind for this cause: that they might be joined together between themselves with mutual benevolence, for the one cannot be without other [...]. *God made man male and female created he them* [Genesis 5.2]. Thus willingly they [godly males.] acknowledge themselves betters to the weaker sex: and godly women in like manner consider of **their dutiful obedience**. Thus the man consisteth not without the woman, because otherwise he should be a head cut off from the body: neither doth the woman stand without the man, because then she would be a dead body. Therefore let the man show the duty of a head in governing her that is his wife: and let the woman show the duty of a body to her husband in helping him. [...]

12. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; But all things of God. If this be one of the causes why the rule is committed to the man, namely because the woman was taken out of him: so also this shall be the reason of friendly conjunction, because the man cannot defend and preserve himself without the woman. For this standeth always sure, *it is not good for man to be alone.* [...] This decree of God doth exhort us to embrace mutual fellowship. *But all is of God.* God is the beginning of both sex. Therefore they both ought with humility to embrace and hold the lot which the Lord hath appointed to them. Let the man moderately govern and not oppress his wife, which is given to him for a help. **Let the woman be contended with subjection and let her not think scorn to be inferior to the more excellent sex.** (*A Commentary* 440–441; italics original, bold mine)

From the time of St. Paul, Christian writers have used the story of Eden to justify ambiguous attitudes toward women. Paul refers to the story of Genesis in which Eve was taken from Adam’s side when he was asleep. Hence women’s moral stature was obviously inferior to men’s [2:21]. On the other hand, celebrants of the Virgin Mary captured God’s promise [Genesis 3:15] that the seed of the woman could eventually distort the heel of the serpent. Reformed theology rejected both extremes: woman was

neither a temptress nor a goddess, but a **wife**. For Calvin the crucial divine inspiration was Genesis 2:17. Taught Calvin:

1 Corinthians [verse 11.8]

8. *For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.* He [St. Paul] confirmeth with two arguments the pre-eminence which he had given to men over wives. [...] [T]he woman taketh her original from the man, by order therefore she is the inferior to the latter. [...] [T]he woman is created for the man's sake: therefore she is subject unto him as the final work is to his cause. That the man is the beginning and the end of the woman it may appear out of the law: *it is not good for man that he be alone, let us make him an help* [Genesis 2.17]. Again: *God took one of the ribs of Adam and Eve ...* . (441)

Calvin carefully distinguished between spiritual and civil equality of women. Radical Reformed theology was combined with a conservative social system based on two sources of woman's nature. Female uncontrolled sexual power was so decreed by God, however, it must be restrained by marriage and consequent obedience. Woman's spiritual equality was also ordained of God but it had to be hindered not to disrupt a civil order in which females were subject to males:

1 Corinthians [verses 14.34–35]

34. *Let your wives keep silence in the congregations: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be under obedience, as saith the law.* It appeareth that the Church of the Corinthians was polluted with this vice also: that women had leave to prate and babble in the holy assembly. Therefore he [Paul] forbiddeth them to speak in public place, in the way of teaching or prophesying. [...] What maketh this subjection to the present purpose whereunto women are bound by the law? [...] I answer that the office of teaching is a jurisdiction or government in the Church, and therefore is contrary to subjection. [...] [T]ruly in all places, where nature's honesty and good manner hath been kept, women in all ages have been excluded from public administration: and common sense teacheth that it is a very foul and unseemly thing for a woman to teach in a public place, because **if she teacheth she has government of all men**, but it is meet that she be subject. (442; italics original, bold mine)

Whenever masculinity was discussed, whether in the context of household duties, conduct, or social roles and position, it was always defined in sharp opposition to femininity. Expected norms of behavior, laboriously reconstructed from careful examination of church sermons and parish records, advice books, poems, diaries, as well as from letters dedicated specifically to women and girls, continually reiterated the fundamental strictures on feminine conduct. Thus the Protestant Reformation relinquished the notion of woman as a temptress or a goddess. As the Protestant Reformers rebuffed all sorts of monasticism, Eve was domesticated and reduced to a wife; she was offered only one choice in life – to be a good *homemaker*. In the 1590s until the 1630s, under the reign of both James I and Charles I, two English radical Puritan clergymen, John Dodd and Robert Cleaver wrote and preached extensively on the Puritan fundamentals of worship. A more extended treatment of the purity of worship and of the disputed religious ceremonies is to be found in their *A Plain and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, first published in 1603. Between 1603 and 1635, *A Plain and Familiar*

Exposition went through nineteen English editions. Both Dodd and Cleaver were leading non-conformists; during the 1630s, Dodd himself ministered to a congregation at Fawsley in Northamptonshire, and was representative of hard-line non-conformity. Both Puritan clergymen stood in sharp opposition to many other Puritans who preferred to conform than to be deprived. It is noteworthy at this point that in 1607, both Dodd and Cleaver were deprived. Remarkably, the most popular were their sermons on women's marital conduct. A collection of their teachings, much read throughout England, was first published in 1598 under the title *A Godly Form of Household Government* and subsequently had numerous extended editions. A central issue in their perception of the virtuous woman was, most of all, her ability to manage the household, to strictly comply with the established marriage patterns, and to continually occupy herself with strenuous work which would prevent her from immersing in idleness, unnecessary meetings, and gossiping with neighbors further than the custom of neighborliness required; significantly, she should perform her duties silently and devotionally, and without any encouragement or admonition:

But what need such as can live by their lands, to labour with their hands? What need had the woman that Solomon speaketh of [Bathsheba]? The conscience of doing good in the world should draw them to do that which no need deriveth them unto [...]. St. Paul requireth that women should array themselves with good works [1 Tim. 2.10], the comeliest ornament in the world, if women had spiritual eyes to discern it. Dorcas, in the Acts [9.36], teacheth wives how to get this array, for she made garments to cloth the naked and the poor. Thus might women find how to set themselves a work, though they could live of their own. But for such as have but a mean allowance, God thereby showeth that he will have them occupy themselves in some honest labour to keep them from idleness, and the evils that issue therefrom. **They therefore must labour** [...]. Let her avoid such occasions as may draw her from her calling. She must shake off sloth and love of ease. She must avoid gossiping further than the law of good neighbourhood doth require. St. Paul would have a woman a good *homekeeper*. The virtuous woman is never so well, as when she is in the midst of her affairs. (Dodd and Cleaver 448-450; italics original, bold mine)

Dodd and Cleaver's sermons are typical of others which propounded fixed domestic roles for women, using theological justification, and specifically the Pauline rules, constantly reiterated in sermons and conduct books. In their interpretation of the biblical injunctions about gender, they strictly follow the contemporary conventions providing a wide range of female qualities which make a wife fitted to her husband both in biological sense, that is in her ability to provide progeny, and in the social terms, placing her in a well-established customary scheme of the contemporary beliefs about and attitudes toward sexuality, aimed both at gentry and country women. Amazingly, Dodd and Cleaver, interested in reforming both private and public ethical habits, soundly accused women of their supposed faults in self-adornment:

The duty [of a wife toward her husband] is comprehended in these points; First that she reverence her husband. Secondly, that she submit herself and be obedient unto him. And lastly that she do not wear gorgeous apparel, beyond her degree and place, but that her attire be comely and sober, according to her calling [...]. The second point is

that wives submit themselves and be obedient unto their own husbands, as to the Lord, because the husband is by God's ordinance the wife's head, that is her defender [Eph. 5.22; 1 Cor. 11; 14.4], teacher, and comforter: and therefore she oweth her subjection to him, like as the Church doth to Christ [...]. As the Church should depend upon the wisdom, discretion and will of Christ and not follow what itself listeth: so must the wife also submit and apply herself to the discretion and will of her husband, even as the government and conduct of everything resteth in the head, not in the body [...]. The Lord also by Moses saith the same: *thy desire shall be subject to thy husband and he shall rule over thee* [...]. Yet it is not meant that the wife should not employ her knowledge and discretion which God hath given her in the help and for the good of her husband: but always as it must be with condition to submit herself unto him, acknowledging him to be her head, that finally they may agree in one, as the conjunction of marriage doth require [...]. (449–450; italics original)

Typically, texts which repeated contemporary stereotypes about sexual and gendered behavior of both men and women, delineated by Reformed theology, were the attacks made on women in the social discourse in which extreme views could be articulated as part of a rhetorical response to the question about the woman's status. Apparently, woman was offered in this controversy a modest place of merely a provider of a comfortable living for man:

[A] modest and chaste woman that loveth her husband, must also love her house, as remembering that the husband that loveth his wife, cannot so well like of the sight of any tapestry, as to see his wife in his house [...]. The best means [...] that a wife can use to obtain, and maintain the love and good liking of her husband, is to be **silent, obedient, peaceable, patient, studious** to appease his choler if he be angry, **painful and diligent** in looking to her business, to be **solitary and honest**. The chief and special cause why most women do fail [in not performing this duty to their husbands] is because they be ignorant of the word of God, which teacheth the same. (450; bold mine)

Naturally, gender systems are not confined to merely assigning work roles to males and females, and/or to identify their current social as well as behavioral mores. As frequently emphasized, *gender* denotes the cultural construction of sex which designates masculine and feminine identification approached through the cultural theory and practice, determined both biologically and socially. In the social, religious, and political reality of seventeenth-century New England such a context made gender an appropriate signifier of authority and power relationships. The 1620 English pilgrims to North America strictly followed traditional concepts of social and political organization firmly rooted in the contemporary European mind. Commonly, that tradition was based on equality, collectivity, and such belief systems which placed women in subordinate position. And only a century later, did Enlightenment theories essentially revise the seventeenth-century worldview and reformulate the prevailing social assumptions based on the divinely ordained hierarchy in family, politics, and society at large. Even William Bradford, one of the signers of the *Mayflower Compact* and the early New England chronicler, describing in his account of the beginnings of the Plymouth settlement the gender-role expectations held by the Puritan Pilgrims, observed gendered power relationships both in the Puritan family and in the state (commonwealth), as institutions alike

in some ways, closely aligned through their similar historical roots, and integrated by their similar purposes and functions. Such relationships formed a specific kind of the “**corporate culture**,” the term which I am proposing here as it seems to best suit my gender analysis of authority and power in early New England society. Bradford clearly conveyed the most fundamental message that according to the Plymouth Pilgrims God had ordained inequality based on the distinctions and stratifications according to rank and consequent wealth, as well as age and sex:

[Anno Dom: 1623]

[...]

Upon ye poynte all being to have alike, and all to doe alike, they thought them selves in ye like condition, and one as good as another; and so, if it did not cut of those relations that God hath set amongst men, yet it did at least much diminish and take of [off] ye mutuall respects that should be preserved amongst them. And would have bene worse if they had been men of another condition. (*Bradford's History* 235–236)

Admittedly, according to Bradford, an egalitarian, communal economic system disturbed “the mutual respects,” and diminished the social stratification ordained of God. Therefore, Bradford categorized men and women separately, viewing women in terms of their relationships with men, but not appropriating any definite role to males in relation to females: “The aged and graver men to be ranked and [...] equalised in labours, and victails, cloaths, & c., with ye meaner & yonger sorte, thought it some indignite & disrespect unto them. And for mens wives to be commanded to doe servise for other men, as dressing their meate, washing their cloaths & c., they deemed it a kind of slaverie, neither could many husbands well brooke it” (235). He divided men into three categories: bachelors, husbands, and elderly men, whereas the only women he recognized were **wives** who corresponded to just one of the mentioned male groups. The unmarried women as well as widows in the colony of Plymouth, that would correspond to bachelors and older men, did not appear in Bradford’s narrative whereas female teenagers were specified as the genderless category of “children,” grouped with their mothers. Logically, therefore, women were always subjected to and controlled by male family members, most commonly fathers or husbands, but also, in justified cases, other male relatives.

In conceptualizing seventeenth-century New England society in the context of the status of women some factors need to be discussed which could appear to considerably impact on the position of individual women. Quite naturally, women did legally exercise some limited authority in their families as mothers. Consequently, since state and family in seventeenth-century New England were both conceptually and practically linked, women could not entirely be excluded from those who legitimately exerted power in society at large. Also, widowhood experienced by individual women gave them some privileges, such as retaining their dowry. They also benefitted from the fact that they were not subject to any man. Significantly, high-status females were of greater worth than low-status males as the rank of those women’s fathers or husbands was more important in determining the women’s social position than their gender. If a combination of those attributes occurred, high-status widowed women could

enjoy some benefits, however, such an ambiguous status of a female posed a serious problem for the state/society/community organization. Commonly, the New England family/household structure, which was composed of both men and women, and which incorporated hierarchies of age, wealth, and gender, placed women according to the corresponding category/categories. The society/state (Puritan Commonwealth) structure, although based on equality, was composed of men only, and resolved the ambiguities in women's status by alienating females and qualifying them irrelevant outside the family/household organization (Norton 10).

The social theology of New England Puritanism assumed the wife's inferiority and her obligation to serve both the household and the community. Almost all Puritan females who reached the age of maturity got married. The Puritans claimed that by the first marriage of Adam and Eve God had established the rules of the holy wedlock thus creating the covenant of man and woman. Although God-ordained, it was virtually a civil contract based on the mutual consent of a husband and his spouse, rather than a sacrament. For the Puritans the crucial Scripture was Genesis 2.18: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will provide him an help meet for him.'" On 19 June, 1694, John Cotton, the Minister at Hampton, preached a sermon at New-Castle on the occasion of the marriage of John Clark and Elizabeth Woodbridge. As was the common practice, Pastor Cotton carefully documented his sermon statements with three biblical references.: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but Whoremongers and Adulterers God will Judge" (Heb. 13.4); "Thou shalt not play the Harlot, and thou shalt not be for another man, so will I also be for thee" (Hos. 3.3); "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Cant. 2.16). In the sermon, ever since popularly known as the "Wedding Sermon," John Cotton argued:

Women are Creatures without which there is no comfortable Living for man: it is true of them what is wont to be said of Governments, *That bad ones are better than none*: They are a sort of Blasphemers then who dispise and decry them, and call them a *necessary Evil*, for they are a *necessary Good*; such as it was not good that man should be without. [...] *Who findeth a Wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.* (Cotton [of Hampton] 14)

Interestingly, the Rev. John Cotton of Hampton (c.1658–1710), a person of great learning, was the grandson of John Cotton, the "Patriarch of Boston" (1584–1652), and the eldest son of Seaborn Cotton (1633–1686). The Rev. John Cotton of Hampton, like his father Seaborn, graduated from Harvard College (1678) and assumed ministry of the Church at Hampton upon his father's death. He worked first as a minister of the gospel (i.e. preacher) and then, on 19 November, 1696, he was ordained pastor. He had serviced at Hampton, with a brief interval, until his death.

Since every Puritan marriage in New England was established of God's ordinance, the marital duties imposed on wife and husband were also divine commands. The covenanted marriage was regarded as a public benefit because it provided the community with social stability, harmony, and order. A natural consequence of marriage was to protect family and to eliminate any forms of domestic malfunction. The explicit instructions about the necessity of marriage came from John Cotton's "Wedding Sermon":

The woman is made to be and is a meet help to man. 1. As She answers natural ends, and so is, a most sweet and intimate companion, and an entire friend; there is no stricter or sweeter friendship than conjugal; as it was the first in the world, so it is most natural. 2. [...] As She answers economical ends, and so is assistant in Family affairs, in the Government of the House, ordering things within doors, especially (for the house is her Center) and she should be an help as before him [...]. Keeping and improving what is got by the industry of the man. [...] She was made for man, and therefore should not despise but honour him, and yield Subjection to him as her Head. Hence man is to use her as a meet help, as a companion, not as a Servant, and should again be an help, and head to her. 7. Let the woman be what she was made for, a meet help, not an unmeet hindrance. (21–24)

Admittedly, the Puritan females of seventeenth-century New England were better protected within their marriages than the contemporary English women. However, their relatively better marital position in terms of secure support did not protect their personal property. A newly wedded female was instantly deprived of all she had owned before marriage for the benefit of her husband. Land and livelihood in New England society were commonly transmitted from father to son. Colonial wives were entirely dependent upon patriarchal families; they did not own their working place or the tools they used in their industries. Even their most diligent labor and skilled service did not secure them land inheritance; female identity never was as property owner but as wife. However, upon the death of a husband they were entitled to maintenance for life, or until they remarried, that is if they transferred their claims (confirmed by the abandonment of name) to a new domestic establishment. Significantly, there existed in Puritan New England an opportunity for a married woman to benefit from two kinds of contracts, so-called *prenuptial* and *postnuptial* agreements. A prenuptial agreement enabled a woman to administer her property according to her own will, whereas the other either reconciled a couple, or formulated a settlement for the departing couple upon which settlement the husband was obliged to maintain the deserted family. The contract had to be accepted by both the husband and the wife. More importantly, a prenuptial agreement enabled a widow to retain her property even when she remarried. A prenuptial agreement of 1654, made for a widowed female, Jane Moore, and for her future second husband, Peter Godson, secured Mrs. Moore's claims to the property left by her deceased husband Richard:

[M]y Husband Richard Moore being Sick and weake upon his death bed did call to his wife Jane Moore and desired her to bring him the will which he had formerly made and he perused it, and after that he cancelled it and caused it to be burned and made his wife whole and Sole Executor to sett and dispose of amongst her Children and She will. [...] I, Jane Moore the wife of Richard Moore deceased doe bind over the four hundred Acres of Land [...] to be equally Divided betwixt my three Sons. [...] For the Land She is to enjoy it so Long as She the Said Jane doth Live. [...] I Peter Godson intending to Intermarry with Jane Moore [...] have agreed and doe hereby consent and agree [...] not to lay any Clayme to [...] any part of the Estate. ("Prenuptial Agreement" 24–25)

Whatever the benefits female New Englanders might occasionally have enjoyed, Puritan social theology imposed strict limits on virtually all forms of their activity; unquestionably,

they were recognized as inferior parts of every relationship. Those limitations stemmed from New England males' claim that they were not only physically but also mentally stronger than women, and that men's mental powers were more appropriate for managing their families, for performing ministerial duties, for shaping colonial social and political reality, and for leading their Puritan communities. Not self-reliant due to their alleged inborn mental imperfection, women were considered to be less capable to achieve higher intellectual and spiritual development than men. Consequently, they were not able enough to enjoy political rights, to speak in public, or to express themselves in writing, at least in a publishable form. Women did not attend colleges, which prevented them from receiving a formal education. Discrepancies in education finally determined a woman's environment, reducing it to the family dwelling and the surrounding space. Although her setting was naturally designed by her husband's rank and economic status, in most general terms it was always similar, regardless of its composition and geographical location. Puritan daughters were taught by their mothers the basic skills of housewifery as well as reading required for religious purposes, most of all for studying the Bible. Commonly, New England young girls were sent as servants or apprentices to other families where they could learn reading and household tasks. However, in a traditional Puritan perception, knowledge acquired by women could be an unnecessary risk to her health. A popular assertion that women's involvement in mental activities, such as reading and writing, might be harmful both physically and mentally, was explicitly pronounced by John Winthrop in his 1645 account. The story about the wife of Winthrop's friend, the Governor of Connecticut, Edward Hopkins was meant to prove that "unrestrained" intellectual capabilities of a woman could affect her state of mind causing serious mental disorder:

Mr. Hopkins, the governor of Hartford upon Connecticut, came to Boston, and brought his wife with him [...] who was fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her divers years by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books. Her husband, being very loving and tender of her, was loath to grieve her; but he saw her error, when it was too late. For if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger. [...] She had kept her with wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God set her.¹ (Winthrop, "On Mistress" 21)

Modesty, charity, chastity, kindness, and exemplary piety which in Puritan theology meant Bible reading and prayer, all combined with industrious labor, was to be an alternative remedy to female sufferings, humiliating practices against her, and unjust accusations of alleged adultery, heresy or witchcraft. The chief exponent of the female virtues was Cotton Mather who never failed to soundly scrutinize the expected female

¹ In 1635, the settlement of Hartford on the River Connecticut was established by a few tens of the Massachusetts colonials under the leadership of the Puritan minister, Thomas Hooker. The 1639 Fundamental Orders, enacted by the General Court, marked the legal beginnings of the colony of Connecticut which was given further legal sanction by the 1662 Royal Charter.

social roles, framed in the popularly known myth of Bathsheba, one of the wives of King David, and the mother of King Solomon. The re-current theme of Bathsheba, a virtuous housewife and God-fearing woman who projected her private virtues into the public sphere, was frequently employed in both English and American preaching. Mather's famed sermon *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, or the Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman*, preached in 1691 (first published in 1692) was based upon verse 30 of Proverbs 31: "Favour is Deceitful, and Beauty is Vain."² In his sermon, Mather seemed to elevate the mental and spiritual potentiality of God-fearing females who, although not allowed to speak in the church and considerably limited in their intellectual activities, by their exemplary piety and godly works wrote themselves the Scriptures, that is Proverbs 31 ascribed by Puritans to good wife Bathsheba:

The Fear of God is that which the Heart of a *Virtuous Woman* is under the Power of. The *Female Sex* is naturally the *Fearful Sex*; but the *Fear of God* is that which [...] all other *Fears* in the *Virtuous Woman*. To state this matter aright, we are to know That the *Fear of God* is in an *Old Testament* Expression, as the *Love of God* in a *New Testament* one [...]. It may then be said of a *Virtuous Woman*, That she is a *Religious Woman*; she ha's Bound her self *again* to that God, whom she had by the Sin and Fall of her *First Mother* departed from [...]; That all kind of *Piety* and of *Charity* is prevailing in her *Disposition*; That *Sobriety* and *Righteousness* and *Godliness* are *Visible* in her whole *Behaviour*; and, That She does *Justice*, loves *Mercy*, and walks *Humbly* with her God. (Mather 19–20, page numbers blurred)

The eminent Puritan preacher directs women in expressing their fear of God in all aspects of their lives to obtain happiness in this world and the world to come. The extended title of the printed edition: "A discourse which directs the female sex how to express the fear of God in every age and state of their life; and obtain both temporal and eternal blessedness" clearly implies the didactic character of Mather's preaching, evidently meant as an advice book for Puritan women – in those times, a popular form of instruction.

As frequently noted, modesty was the key concept of hierarchy and a basic requirement of every virtuous woman. Not only was modesty measured by the necessity of controlling the female emotion but also by the demand of wearing long and demure, unpretentious attires which covered women's hair and arms. Typically, dark colors and the lack of any decorative elements were to demonstrate the severity of the female image. Wearing jewelry, including a wedding ring, was strictly forbidden. The virtuous woman of Proverbs, attributed to Solomon's mother, was legitimated to wear "clothing of fine linen and purple [silk]" if her husband's rank and economic status permitted, that is if he was "well known in the gates" and sat "with the elders of the land"; she was also entitled to make "her own coverings [of tapestry]," yet always remembering that "beauty is vain" ["beauty fleeting"]. Silk scarves, however, were reserved solely for women whose husbands' economic worth was estimated at 200 sterling pounds (Thatcher Ulrich 59). It was not only the sexual propriety that could be violated by wearing clothing above a woman's status; the social theology of Puritan New England

2 Cf. "Charm is a delusion and beauty fleeting." *The New English Bible*. The Bible Societies (1974).

made modesty a female's main quality because of the secondary position of women in the public sphere. They were to merely reflect and never to assert or expose their status because status was to be manifested and exemplified through conduct and behavior, dignity and manners, attitude and speech, also through modest clothing, and the least so through appearance. In a common perception, clothes distinguished the better sort from the ordinary, as well as pride from virtue. The Sumptuary Laws, which codified the expenditure of the people and could apply to clothing as well as to jewelry, food and beverages, furthered those divisions which carried subtle clues concerning status. These laws were made to control such behavior as wearing certain apparel, consuming certain foods and beverages, and even hunting games in certain areas. During the Reformation in the early 1500s, the English Parliament restricted the number of courses for a meal to two, except on holidays when more courses were allowed. Clothing and household goods were also included under the Sumptuary laws, ascribing to each class what they could own or wear (the very word "sumptuary" comes from the Latin word which means "expenditure"). Significantly, these laws were often directed to the growing lower and middle class and, evidently, their enactment was intended to preserve class distinctions. The Elizabethan Sumptuary Laws of 1574, called the "Statutes of Apparel," were meant mainly for the lower and middle classes. They dictated what color and type of clothing individuals were allowed to own and wear. It was an easy way to immediately identify rank and privilege and thus to maintain the social structure of the Elizabethan class system.

Similarly, female physical attractiveness, although not condemned by the Puritan theologians, was the threat of sexual impropriety and a clear evidence of the violation of the virtue of modesty. Natural beauty, argued Cotton Mather, though admittedly pleasing to the senses and minds of the people, was ruinous for the high moral standards of the Puritan *ethos*, and was diverting women's attention from their customary duties and obligations. Mather, the chief spokesman of female modesty and submissiveness, vigorously instructed his Puritan congregation from his Boston pulpit:

By *Beauty* is meant, a good Proportion and Symmetry of the parts, and a skin well Varnished, or that which *Chrysostom*³ calls *A Good mixture of Blood and Flegm Spinning through a good Skin*; With all the Harmonious Air of the Countenance, which recommends it self, as a *Beauty*, to the Eye of the Spectator. The *Virtuous Woman*, is not Unthankful for this *Beauty*, when the God of Nature has bestow'd any of it on her; and yet She counts it no *Virtue* for her to be very sensible of her being, illustrated with such a *Beauty*. But still she looks up on it as a *Vain* thing. She reckons it so *Vain*, that she has no Assurance for the Continuance of it. (12–13, page numbers blurred)

Puritan females were expected to hide their physical attractiveness following the contemporary conviction that beauty was temporal and deceptive, making women vain and blind to eternal truths. Accordingly, males claimed that they did not approve of females who exposed their beauty. Following the Mather teaching, males did not question that

3 Cotton Mather probably meant Dio Chrysostom, a Greek orator, writer, philosopher and historian of the Roman Empire in the 1st century. His surname *Chrysostom* comes from the Greek *chryso-* *tomos*, literally "golden-mouthed."

beauty was a special gift of God for which women should be grateful, yet they explicitly demanded that beauty not prevent pretty females from still remaining modest and humble. Significantly, however, Puritan men, above all, valued those women who, apart from their piety and modesty, brought profit. The relationship between morality and materialism was subtle. After all, female beauty might combine with her religious zeal; her thrift and diligence could turn into wealth. Thus a combination of material culture and moral values seemed to reveal a larger conflict in New England society: on the one hand, a strong desire for profit and wealth and, on the other, traditional, conservative values – Bible reading, thrift, patriarchal authority, as well as feminine piety, submissiveness, and productivity. And clearly, **productive** women were much more valued in the social gospel of Puritanism than **ornamental** ones as in contemporary mentality the two were mutually exclusive.

In reassessing the position of women in the social complexity of the New England Puritan world, and in redefining their gender roles, it is essential to remember that no innovation or individuality was appreciated. The Puritan sermon literature of the time clearly indicates that congregational ministers refrained from advancing novel ideas about marriage, family relations, and gendered authority. In their preaching they chose rather to promote commonly known, familiar notions and concepts. It seems that the only “physical” location of some kind of female individuality and uniqueness could merely be an epitaph on a gravestone, a symbolic exemplification of a single life of a zealous Puritan woman living in a particular place and time. Commonly, an epitaph was to commemorate an individual exemplary life, but it also was to transcend and elevate personality, although written into a broad and elaborate setting of the social and religious context. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich gives an example of a York Village cemetery gravestone of Hannah Moody with an inscription which documented the life of one pious Puritan woman deceased at the turn of 1728: “Eminent for Holiness, Prayerfulness, Watchfulness, Zeal, Prudence, Sincerity, Humility, Meekness, Patience, Weariedness From ye World, Self-denial, Publick-Spiritedness, Diligence, Faithfulness & Charity” (Hannah Moody gravestone).

In many ways this graveyard inscription captured most of the Puritan imagination; it also exemplified contemporary spirituality and everyday practice, best scrutinizing the essence of the status of women, built into the social theology of early New England.

Works Cited

- Bercovitch, Sacvan, ed. *The American Puritan Imagination. Essays in Reevaluation*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Bradford's History "Of Plimoth Plantation"* [By William Bradford, the Second Governor of the Colony]. Book II. 1623. Reprint from the original manuscript, from the Massachusetts Historical Collections. Edited, with notes By Charles Deane (Boston 1856). The edition used here was printed in 1898 in Boston, by Wright & Potter Printing Co. Electronic version by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt of Gordon College, Wenham, Mass., 2002.

- Calvin, John. *A Commentary Upon St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians*. First Epistle to the Corinthians. Text from Thomas Tymme's translation, 1577. *The English Renaissance. An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Ed. Kate Aughterson. The Taylor & Francis e-Library. 440–443.
- Cotton, John [of Hampton]. *A Meet Help, or, A Wedding Sermon Preached at New-Castle in New-England, June 19th 1694. At the Marriage of Mr. John Clark and Mrs. Elizabeth Woodbridge. By Mr. John Cotton, Pastor of the Church at Hampton, Boston*. Printed by B. Green, and J. Allen, 1699. Copy (reprint) obtained at the US Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- Dodd, John and Robert Cleaver. *A Godly Form of Household Government*. 1598. Text from the 1614 edition. *The English Renaissance: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Ed. Kate Aughterson. The Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.
- Dyrness, William A. *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Kerber, Linda K. and Jane De Hart-Mathews, eds. *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Mather, Cotton. *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, or the Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman: In a Discourse which Directs the Female Sex how to Express the Fear of God in every Age and State of their Life; and Obtain both Temporal and Eternal Blessedness*. Cambridge. Printed by S.G. & B.G. (Boston, 1691). Copy (reprint) obtained at the US Library Of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- Miller, Perry. *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953.
- Miller, Perry. "The Puritan State and Puritan Society." *Puritanism and the American Experience*. Ed. Michael McGiffert. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1969. 40–48.
- Norton, Mary Beth. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- "Prenuptial Agreement of Jane Moore and Peter Godson." 1654. *Major Problems in American Women's History: Documents and Essays*. Ed. Mary Beth Norton. Lexington, Mass.: Heath and Company, 1989.
- Thatcher Ulrich, Laurel. *Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750*. New York: Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc., 1991.
- Winthrop, John. *A Modell of Christian Charity*. Lay sermon, 1630. Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1838). Online Computer Library Center.
- Winthrop, John. "On Mistress Hopkins's Madness." 1645. *Major Problems in American Women's History: Documents and Essays*. Ed. Mary Beth Norton. Lexington, Mass.: Heath and Company, 1989.
- Ziff, Larzer. *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.