For the "Peace of the Commonwealth"

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Gender and Societal Stability in the Trial of Anne Hutchinson

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The trial and interrogation of Anne Hutchinson represents a number of competing cultural interests and societal concerns: politics, religion, and gender. Scholarly opinion as to the primary motivation (or whether any one issue can claim “primary” motivation) behind this trial and interrogation varies. However, Professor Lad Tobin challenges what he claims is a bias of the critical body of work surrounding Hutchinson’s trial and attempts to settle on a primary cause for the event. Responding to what he sees as a tradition of scholarship sympathetic with the “paternalism of Puritan society” (253), Tobin takes issue with what he views as a vaguely sexist tendency to frame Hutchinson “as if she were the elders’ naughty daughter” (254). Tobin argues that this scholarly bias has favored other elements in the Hutchinson trial (principally politics and religion) as the primary source of the controversy, sidelining gender as a secondary issue. He contends that the Elders’ gender-based frustration fuels the trial and that the text reveals gender “not as a secondary issue. . .but as the root cause” (254).

Having neither the expertise nor the page length necessary for an exhaustive consideration of the cultural and societal context surrounding
Hutchinson’s trial, this paper will primarily engage with the text—the transcript of Hutchinson’s initial examination and sentencing—in an effort to weigh the language of those voices present (principally Governor Winthrop’s) and get at the principal motivation behind the Elders’ concerns. Analysis of the issue will also consider the critical conversation surrounding the Antinomian Controversy and what it reveals about the potential threat Hutchinson and her followers represented in the minds of the Elders. This paper is not an attempt at reductionism or the over-simplification of a complex event, nor is it an over-ambitious attempt to disentangle religion from politics in Puritan society (as they are perhaps functionally inseparable) in order to say which is the biggest motivator in the Hutchinson trial. Instead, this paper will conduct an analysis of the Elders’ primary interests as revealed by their language and line of questioning. It will also consider the implications of the Antinomian movement in order to determine whether or not gender can be called the premiere issue of the text. A careful review of both the governor’s rhetorical approach (which also reveals the Elders’ priorities) and the historical context sheds unique light on the role of gender in Puritan politics and helps us to avoid modernist projections of feminist concerns into a different time.

While Tobin claims gender is the fundamental issue, he seems to miss the actual function gender performs in the trial transcript as means to the end of resolving a far more menacing situation: the threat of societal instability. The Elders use the issue of female misconduct as justification to dismantle a politically threatening body growing in number and influence. Hutchinson’s Antinomian views and the socio-political dissent they imply present the most tangible threat to authority figures of the commonwealth like the Elders and Governor Winthrop. The term “Antinomianism,” from the Greek anti (against) and nomos (law), is used in American history to describe the socio-political stir caused by Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and literally means “against or opposed to the law” (Hall 3). While the term traditionally carries particularly religious connotations, the word itself doesn’t etymologically suggest any restriction to the realm of spiritual or moral law; thus, this potentially represents a threat with both religious and political implications. It is difficult to imagine a body of community members (a regularly convening body no less) rallying around an ideology more frightening to civic leadership than Antinomianism. Indeed, to Hutchinson and her Antinomian followers, “one’s identity (and authority) as one of the Elect was conferred by individual revelation and had nothing to do with observance of external laws or submission
to civil and ecclesiastical authority” (Castillo 232). Thus, the fundamental premise of Antinomianism is one that flouts any and all terrestrial authority that seeks to control or contain it; this sort of premise poses a direct threat to the order and structure of the Puritan community. A careful textual analysis of Hutchinson’s interrogation and a consideration of the Antinomian threat prove tremendously fruitful in ascertaining the ideological head of the controversy. This paper contends with Tobin’s position for gender “as the root cause” of Hutchinson’s trial and instead argues that the transcript reveals gender as merely a means to an end—that end being maintaining the societal and political stability of the Puritan community.

Governor John Winthrop puts forward the fundamentals of the Anne Hutchinson problem in a decidedly “guilty until proven guilty” tenor that wastes no time in treating her not as a feminist revolutionary but as a socio-political threat to be eliminated. The Governor opens Hutchinson’s examination without explicitly enumerating her crimes or explaining her wrongdoing (as if such trifles were unnecessary) but, instead, vaguely identifies her as “one of those that have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here” (Hutchinson). A moment later, he is somewhat more clear, elaborating that Hutchinson “hath had a great share in the promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble.” With his use of the phrase “one of those” in the first passage and “this trouble” in the second, the governor already reveals a rhetorical strategy: to speak with absolute confidence, whether feigned or genuine, that her crimes must be equally familiar to all present—just as much to her as to them—and that they need not be named to be known. At the outset Winthrop’s language presumes guilt and seeks to convict her already of her unnamed crimes, as if her culpability was simply a matter of fact. Of course, the governor does go on to say that these “opinions” of hers have proved “very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers” and that Hutchinson has held an “assembly” in her home that “hath been condemned by the general assembly.” The unhelpful vagueness of the phrase “prejudicial to the honour” aside, the general assembly’s denunciation of Hutchinson’s own “assembly” becomes significant. Winthrop’s chosen delivery of the condemnation implies a long-standing judgment with the present perfect tense of “hath been” and refrains from mentioning whether prior notice of said condemnation had been issued. Thus, the implied “long-standing” judgment of the council may never have been made known to Hutchinson herself (and at no point do the Elders reference instances of prior warning), and yet the governor speaks as
if all creation were acquainted with the terms of her misdeeds. Winthrop’s language assumes that Hutchinson “hath been” operating with an awareness of her crimes, whether or not that was the case. Winthrop’s strategy from the very beginning of the interrogation seeks to establish Hutchinson as an obvious political subversive, as if her status as dissident revolutionary were either self-evident or at least common knowledge.

Along with the governor’s rhetorical strategy, Winthrop exposes a hierarchy of concerns in his revealing opening remarks that produces our first notion of the place gender really occupies in the controversy. The Elders’ primary preoccupations with Hutchinson’s offenses, detailed by the governor in the above items, are addressed in the following order: upholding the honor of “the churches and ministers,” enforcing the opinion of the general assembly, condemning Hutchinson’s activities, and correcting behavior unbecoming of her gender. Winthrop’s decision to list his concerns in the preceding order sets up a helpful structure that hints at the Elders’ priorities. As the governor’s opening comments, they bear the hallmark of carefully scripted and organized remarks that have been deliberately ordered. The careful, calculated rhetorical organization of Winthrop’s opening statement exposes his hierarchy of concerns and reveals the maintenance of the social, religious, and political status quo as being first and foremost in his mind. Right up front, Winthrop’s language suggests (and at times declares) that Hutchinson’s guilt has already been decided. Though, to the careful reader, his early rhetorical decisions also end up revealing the nature of his and the Elders’ most pressing anxieties. Stirring up trouble in the Lord’s chosen community is a threat to stability, which the commonwealth cannot risk tolerating.

Rhetorical priorities aside, the pomp and circumstance of addressing the Antinomian threat—interrogation, public trial, and banishment—in order to penalize Hutchinson for behavior unbecoming of her sex merely acts as a cover for the true calculated disciplinary move to retain political power and ensure societal stability. The reality of the Puritan project is that “men ran the society which expressed the covenant with God” and, consequently, “all men were, by definition, closer to God than women” (Barker-Benfield 68). A woman of the commonwealth had no choice but to accept “that she could receive wealth, power, and status only through the man” (Koehler 63). This raises the question: If only men hold the power, where is the threat in some powerless woman who disagrees with the minister over some point of doctrine in the Sunday sermon? Hutchinson tested the limitations of the male dominated power structures
and was sharply reproved. Being a woman, she was punished for her audacity. However, the gravity of the punishment is telling; it involved not only the banishment and excommunication of Hutchinson herself but also the dismissal, disenfranchisement, and excommunication of her numerous followers. It wasn’t Hutchinson’s gender that brought down the oversized hammer. It was the movement she spearheaded and represented—the movement that jeopardized socio-political life as the colony knew it. When the assembly of Elders was called in September of 1637 and the religious and civic leaders gathered to deal with the Antinomian problem, Governor Winthrop recorded the proceedings and his thoughts and views regarding them in a journal: “A close reading of John Winthrop’s Journal reveals that the decisions of the Synod [the gathering of elders] functioned essentially to shore up crumbling civil and religious authority” (Castillo 232). The governor’s private journal identifies the Elders’ primary anxiety: the destabilization of the community and deterioration of their power within it. Though Winthrop returns to Hutchinson’s gender throughout the interrogation to justify their disciplinary action, the governor knows that what the Elders have been convened to quash is much bigger than one woman forgetting her place. Indeed, one woman’s suggestive challenge of religious/political authority resulted in one of the most ideologically influential movements of early American history.

The heart of the text’s case for gender as primary motivation rests on a moment that both Tobin and I would identify as the most rhetorically significant exchange of Hutchinson’s examination, though for different reasons. Hutchinson and the governor arrive at a new point in the debate; one they both seem to regard as entirely relevant, and one that Tobin views as the text’s strongest evidence for gender as the fuel behind the controversy. The governor contends, “If your meeting had answered to the former [truly not had men present] it had not been offensive, but I will say that there was no meeting of women alone, but your meeting is of another sort for there are sometimes men among you.” Taken by itself, this statement seems to decide the matter. Here Winthrop virtually admits that much of this whole problem, a good deal (if not all) of this “trouble” that Hutchinson has been stirring up to unsettle the commonwealth, could have been avoided if she had simply restrained herself from instructing men. Plainly, it is the idea that men were present at an assembly hosted and conducted by a woman that has so incensed the governor. But then he goes on: “Your course is not to be suffered for . . . we find such a course as this to be greatly prejudicial to the state.” Winthrop’s explanation of the why transforms
the nature of his motivation and concern. His concern for the state does not
negate the preceding outrage; rather, it is the source of his outrage. It’s not that
gender isn’t a prominent and even crucial issue throughout the examination,
but that, when taken in context with the rest of the transcript, it becomes clear
that gender is still an inferior concern put into service of a much more alarming
problem. Gender is a less significant anxiety employed to facilitate the resolution
of the primary threat—the religious and political stability of the community. A few
kooky Antinomian women talking revolutionary heresy amongst themselves
present no great threat to the religious hierarchy and politics of the common-
wealth. Start instructing the men, though, and one starts influencing societal
structure and perhaps even civic policy. This is the potential threat that could
prove “greatly prejudicial to the state.” Had anyone been carrying on such meet-
ings, propagating Antinomian ideas that undermined the order and practice of
the local ministry/political authority, woman or not, it would have elicited a
governmental reaction. Though undoubtedly the text demonstrates an added
measure of outrage that a woman—who should be off submissively yielding to
something somewhere—is the source of this Antinomian nonsense, the fact
remains that her gender merely aggravates the situation and grants the paternal
Elders a greater sense of duty in bringing the hammer down. Gender here is
an issue that appears central but is, in fact, peripheral. Her sex simply fans the
flames of the problem; it was never the cause of the fire.

Scholarly reflection on this period’s historical record supports the same
conclusions drawn from the governor’s revealing language in the trial—that
the Elders’ concerns are not motivated by some patriarchal need to police gen-
der roles but by social and political interests. The legacy of the Antinomian
Controversy is not so much an early blip on the timeline of the battle for
gender equality as it is an ideological upset that challenged the very founda-
tions of religious and socio-political authority. It is worth considering what
historical hindsight reveals about the lasting effects of Hutchinson’s bold move
in challenging the theological opinions of local leadership. Professor Michelle
Burnham, investigating the historical watermarks left behind by the powerfully
influential Antinomian movement, notes that it marked “the earliest large-

scale social, political, and theological crisis in the Massachusetts Bay Colony”
(338). Burnham identifies Hutchinson and her followers as having incited a
“social, political, and theological crisis,” not an equal rights dilemma. While
Hutchinson’s demonstration of courage and cleverness certainly deserves a

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place in the annals of feminism, the fact remains that her bold challenge is still regarded primarily as a social or political one.

The impact that the socio-political tumult had on the commonwealth created the sort of waves that still allow scholars to sift through texts of the period and readily identify them as pre- or post-Antinomian Controversy. The social uproar "generated a significant number and variety of documents that are noteworthy for their anxious insistence on the stability of the colonial community of Massachusetts and the coherence of its religious mission" (Burnham 338). As an Early American scholar, Burnham's review of the period's primary sources observes significant evidence of what looks an awful lot like overcompensating. Following the Hutchinson episode, civic and religious leaders suddenly felt the urge to affirm and reaffirm the "stability of the colonial community." One doesn't feel the need to repeatedly convince others that all is well unless there exists a dissenting opinion on the subject. The scramble of the leadership to assuage the worries of any who might read accounts of the colony's instability following the controversy demonstrates precisely the sort of insecurity and vulnerability they hoped to mask. Leaders of the colony were anxious to preserve the façade of "all is well" in order to avoid endangering the future of their whole enterprise. Thus thoughtful scholarship of the historical record surrounding the controversy reveals the degree to which Hutchinson's Antinomianism socially unsettled and politically undermined the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Professor Tobin's argument focuses rather single-mindedly on what it regards as a display of Puritan sexism, distracting from the heart and substance of Anne Hutchinson's trial in which gender is an aggravator rather than the motivator. Gender is irrefutably part of the issue, just not the cause of it. Additionally, as a historical perspective on the Antinomian Controversy illustrates, Hutchinson's legacy tends far more toward the socio-political than toward an arena of gender equality. The transcript reveals that the Elders and Governor Winthrop's principal concern is not that a woman has been engaged in activities unfitting to her sex, but that a member of the commonwealth commenced an enterprise that threatened the religious and socio-political stability of the community. A final illustration of the Elders' commitment to subordinate all things to the will of political and societal order is evidenced in a particular appeal by Hutchinson to Winthrop and the Elders that seems difficult to contest: "Must not I then entertain the saints because I must keep my conscience." Hutchinson merely asks why it is she cannot be permitted to follow the dictates of her own conscience and host an assembly of friends to
discuss issues of theology and spirituality. Winthrop's response is decisive: “If you do countenance those that are transgressors of the law you are in the same fact.” True, the governor's reaction is not without logic. A person cannot expect to harbor criminals or criminal activity without being held responsible themselves. Yet, alleged criminality of Hutchinson's activities aside, Winthrop is also saying something else with his response: One can keep one's conscience, so long as it promotes the interests of the commonwealth. Hutchinson's activities became too politically inconvenient for the Elders to allow any longer not because Puritans are sexist, but because preserving the societal integrity of the city upon a hill is more important than any one of its members. Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from the Antinomian episode is not that gender was wholly irrelevant to the proceedings. On the contrary, Winthrop's language was occasionally inflected with patriarchal frustration that a woman, not just anyone, would dare cause such a heretical tumult. However, had Hutchinson been a man—sewing Antinomian ideas throughout the commonwealth and undermining local clergy as well as civic authorities—the Elders would have responded just as decisively. It is tremendously important to honor the societal advances in civil rights and gender equality, and concern for a past in which many of the civil liberties we presently enjoy are absent is, indeed, healthy. Where we err is in projecting a modern social understanding into the past, assuming that our priorities must certainly have been theirs.
Works Cited


