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Havens and Covens

Pregnancy, Witchcraft, and Female Power in Cotton Mather's "Retired Elizabeth"

Brittney Hatchet

Cotton Mather gives women numerous exhortations regarding their spiritual and physical health in his medical guide *The Angel of Bethesda*, particularly in the chapter regarding pregnancy, entitled "Retired Elizabeth." Among these, he pointedly instructs pregnant women to ensure that the Spirit of God "take an Early Possession" of their unborn children (240). This language of "possession" permeates much of the text and suggests an underlying concern about demonic possession, witchcraft, and other occult influences in women's lives. However, this concern seems peculiar in a chapter intended to be a medical guide on successful pregnancy, even one informed by a belief in the medical efficacy of righteous living (Bullough 207). Indeed, if Mather's intent in writing "Retired Elizabeth" is to offer pregnant women "remedies to Abate the *Sorrows of Child-bearing*," the question remains: what is the relevance of witchcraft and supernatural possession to that goal (235)?

Within the wide breadth of scholarship regarding early American literature and history, several critics have discussed Mather's attitudes toward women and witchcraft across his various works, as he is well known for his involvement in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. In critical conversations regarding Mather and witchcraft, scholars such as Richard Werking and Thomas J. Holmes have said much about Mather's potential motivations for his interest in witchcraft,

complemented by historical analyses like Erika Gasser's, which explores how transatlantic theology and belief affected how Mather and his contemporaries approached and viewed witchcraft (Werking 290, Gasser 3). Likewise, in conversations focusing on Mather's attitudes toward women, critics like Kathleen Doty and Brice Peterson have discussed at length how Mather's various texts seek to exert control over women spiritually and physically. Both Doty and Peterson agree that maintaining control is one of Mather's central motivations, but their opinions diverge on the nature of that control. Doty posits that Mather expresses a fundamental belief that women are spiritually inferior to men in the text of *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, justifying his desire for spiritual and theological control over women, whereas Peterson suggests that the text of "Retired Elizabeth" reveals Mather's underlying anxiety about the unpredictable nature of childbirth in the early 18th century, which motivated him to exert control over women in a way that minimized their agency and their role in reproduction and childbirth (Doty 145, Peterson 127).

I propose that "Retired Elizabeth" can and should be a point of convergence for the critical conversations surrounding Mather, witchcraft, and his attitudes toward women. Peterson and Doty are correct to argue that Mather seeks to control women and their spaces, but I assert that his desire for control is more than just a fear of "the unknowable and unpredictable" (Peterson 127). In light of previous scholarship regarding early modern thought about witchcraft and Mather's interest in the subject, it is apparent that Mather, like many of his contemporaries, firmly believed that "to deny the reality of witchcraft is to deny the reality of God" (Jones xii). I therefore argue that this belief permeates Mather's perception of women, and thus the occult-coded language within the text of "Retired Elizabeth" reveals that Mather seeks control over women because he is deeply concerned by their susceptibility to the influence of the devil. Indeed, he is afraid that if he does not have control over the uniquely female-led sphere of the birthing room, then it could all too easily become a space where women engage in witchcraft and other occult practices because he understands that reproduction is "the greatest and most mysterious of all energies" (Adams 321).

Historical Context

This analysis of "Retired Elizabeth" is rooted in the historical context of two relevant Puritan beliefs: first, that women are highly susceptible to spiritual and

supernatural influences—both divine and diabolic—and second, that witchcraft is the ultimate manifestation of the diabolic feminine (Doty 145, 149). By approaching “Retired Elizabeth” in the context of these beliefs, we can readily see Mather’s fear of divine reproductive power becoming twisted into a form of witchcraft. This perspective not only lends insight into why Mather is so concerned about the occult in “Retired Elizabeth” but also shows why he makes such a concerted effort to intrude into the birthing room and assert control over the space and the women who inhabit it.

In light of this, it is clear that Mather seeks control over women because he fears they will be more likely to engage in witchcraft if the spaces where they congregate are not controlled by male ecclesiastical authority. Because Mather’s theology in the text establishes childbirth as a salvific power unique in its femininity, he rhetorically associates childbirth with the spiritual volatility that he ascribes to women. This volatility frightens Mather because if childbirth is as susceptible to demonic influence as he believes women to be, then its powerful salvific potential implies the existence of an equally potent damning one. Thus by Mather’s logic, a woman’s procreative power is simultaneously the ultimate expression of virtue—salvation—and the ultimate expression of vice: witchcraft.

Mather’s fear of the power inherent in procreation motivates his desire to limit women’s access to it. In the text of “Retired Elizabeth,” he seeks to actualize this desire through two key rhetorical moves: first, controlling women’s theological perception of childbirth and second, redefining the lived experience of childbirth itself as a soteriological matter whose outcomes determine women’s salvation. By using his ecclesiastical authority as a member of the clergy to establish himself as a spokesperson for God, Mather rhetorically reframes the power of reproduction as a power that belongs exclusively to God. In so doing, he frames God as the active agent in childbirth and women as mere passive vessels through which God expresses His power. This strips women of their ownership of reproductive power and suggests that women can only acceptably access it through the intervention of God and, by extension, the male clergy. Mather is then able to justify his intrusion into the birthing room and assert control as an ecclesiastical leader with the authority to dictate and interpret the outcomes of birth. Through this intrusion, Mather seeks to remove spiritual uncertainty from the birthing room and ensure that women are not using reproductive power outside the bounds he deems acceptable, implying that any deviation from these bounds is tantamount to witchcraft. Consequently, this reading of

“Retired Elizabeth” invites us to reconsider Mather’s overall fascination with the occult as being informed by his underlying fear of women’s potential for evil when they are allowed to exercise power outside the confines of male ecclesiastical authority.

The Spiritual Nature of Women and the Saving Power of Childbirth

Early in the text, Mather establishes that women’s spiritual nature is paradoxically more susceptible to both good and evil influences than men. He refers to women as both a “*Daughter of Eve*” as well as “*An Handmaid of the Lord*” at different moments, paradoxically connecting his female audience to the Original Sin and inherently fallen nature of Eve as well as Mary, the figure of perfect female holiness (235). He further asserts that while “the Number of the *Males* who are apparently *Pious*, and partakers of a *New Birth*, is not so great as that of the *Females*,” women also inherently have a “*Corrupt Nature*” and exist in “*Sinful and Woful Circumstances before the Lord*” (236, 238, 237). This duality indicates that Mather is concerned about the likelihood of women “falling into *Hands*, which it is a *Fearful Thing to fall into*,” and therefore feels the need to emphasize how important it is that they engage in “*exercises of PIETY*” to stave off the influence of the devil while they are pregnant (237, 236). His concern is so great that he continues these exhortations for eleven pages, saving only three for clinical medical advice on pregnancy and childbirth.

While spirituality was often seen as an important aspect of medical care in early modern America, and indeed Mather’s work “cannot be understood if not read with this religious orientation in view,” other chapters of *The Angel of Bethesda* do not go into as intense of depth on the religiosity of the medical issue in question (Jones xii). In these chapters, the ratio of religious to medical advice is much more balanced, and Mather uses roughly the same amount of pages for both perspectives. To cite just a couple examples, Mather’s chapter on the “Cure for the Head-ache” contains a page and a half of religious advice and three pages of medical remedies, and his chapter on “The Anguish, and Releef, of The Tooth-ache” contains two and a half pages of religious advice and two pages of medical remedies (57, 61). In contrast, “Retired Elizabeth” comprises

a staggering eleven pages of religious advice and a mere three pages of medical remedies. The disproportionate focus on spirituality in “Retired Elizabeth” when compared to his other entries reveals that Mather does not see childbirth as a truly medical issue. Rather, he understands childbirth as primarily an external representation of women’s spiritual health and, by extension, their spiritual volatility.

In Mather’s theological view, childbirth is more than just an aspect of women’s lives; it is the key to their salvation. He quotes 1 Timothy 2:15 to assert that women are “*Saved in Childbearing if they continue in Faith, and Charity and Holiness, with Sobriety,*” thereby giving soteriological power to the outcomes of childbirth (239). However, because the power to give birth is feminine in nature and Mather views susceptibility to supernatural influence as an innate attribute of femininity, he concludes that pregnancy must also be easily influenced by the supernatural because of its association with femininity. Since he and other ministers at the time were deeply concerned about the spiritual and physical uncertainties that surrounded childbirth, Mather uses this belief in women’s susceptibility to demonic influences to explain and justify the frequency of complications and death that women suffered during pregnancy, labor, and delivery (Peterson 132). Therefore, if a pregnancy goes wrong, Mather can justify the tragedy by asserting that the woman brought it upon herself through her own sin and unworthiness.

However, this same spiritual volatility that provides convenient answers to the medical uncertainties of childbirth also frightens Mather because it implies that if the salvific power of childbirth gives women the potential to create a “Glorious CHRIST,” then it also gives them the potential to create something “monstrous” (Mather 237, Peterson 130). Further, because the powers associated with divine providence and witchcraft have a “confusing similarity” despite their theological opposition, Mather fears that if left to their own devices, women will succumb to the power of the devil and convert the power of holy childbirth into witchcraft (Kibbey 127). He is so concerned about this occurring that he seeks to limit women’s access to supernatural power by controlling their theological perception of childbirth and framing their lived experiences with pregnancy and birth as the determiners of their salvation.

Exerting Control and Redefining Childbirth

To accomplish this, Mather establishes rhetorical authority over women and justifies his presence in the female-led birthing room by asserting that he is a mouthpiece for God and therefore has ecclesiastical authority over their space. He frequently evokes such phrases as “the Will of the Great God has been declared,” effectively equating his words with divinity, and prefaces his arguments with implications that what he says so “saith your God,” mirroring the language of biblical prophets as a means of substantiating the advice that he gives (236, 237). Additionally, he uses scores of scriptural quotes and biblical anecdotes throughout the text to rhetorically suggest that his counsels are not his but are, in fact, “the Counsils of God,” which the faithful Puritan women in his audience would have likely been hesitant to reject (236). In so doing, Mather strengthens his “delicate authority” in the birthing room and leverages his position as an ecclesiastical leader to gain control in a space he ordinarily would be barred from entering (Peterson 129). By establishing his right to control theological aspects of childbirth as God’s spokesman, Mather is then able to define those aspects how he chooses.

Through this established authority, Mather theologically redefines the power of reproduction as a power that belongs exclusively to God rather than to women. Transatlantic concepts of witchcraft were often associated with women’s sexual and procreative bodies, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries, and the demonic power that witches were accused of using has its roots in the conceptualization of procreation as a form of power unique to women (Garrett 34, Adams 321). Because of this, Mather sees it as necessary to limit women’s access to this power and control its use. He asserts that childbirth is “the *Strange Work of God*,” and when referencing the story of the Virgin Mary and the Nativity to support his point, he specifically says that it was “The Great SAVIOUR who condescended once to make a Virgin, *The Tabernacle of God*,” which not only emphasizes Christ’s power but also actively diminishes the role of Mary as His mother to that of an object being used for divine purposes (240, 239). In so doing, Mather deliberately defines God as the active agent in childbirth and women as merely passive vessels through which God expresses procreative power. By stripping women of their agentive role in childbirth, Mather attempts to change how women theologically perceive it. He hopes that if women see themselves as

vessels to be filled by the power of God instead of agents who create with their own power, then they are more likely to succumb to God's influence than the devil's.

By redefining the theological concept of childbirth in this way, Mather suggests that the outcome of childbirth is a public representation of a woman's personal spiritual standing with God. He asserts that God "*Commands His Good Angels to bring and work Deliverances*" to faithful women, and that God "*made the Hebrew Women so Lively, that they were ordinarily delivered before a Midwife could come to them*" because they "*Suitably Pray'd unto*" Him and expressed sufficient piety and faith (244, 241). In contrast, he subtly suggests that unsuccessful childbirth comes about because "*When Lust hath Conceived, it brings forth Sin, and Sin when it is finished brings forth Death*," implying that a miscarried or stillborn child—i.e., a pregnancy that "*brings forth Death*"—proves a woman's personal spiritual unworthiness (240). In so doing, Mather suggests that women can only acceptably and successfully access the power of procreation through the intervention of God and the conspicuously male clergy that represent divine authority on Earth.

If a woman is able to bear a "*Perfect Child*" as she is expected to, then it is because the teaching and guidance of Mather or other leaders enabled her to become worthy enough for God to take an "*Early Possession of it*" (245, 240). However, if she cannot, then it is because she did not adequately heed Mather's words, and—much like in the case of Anne Hutchinson—her reproductive failure signifies that she has fallen out of favor with God, or worse, that she is a witch (Peterson 130, 135). This affords Mather further justification for his intrusion into the birthing room as an ecclesiastical leader and establishes his control over women during childbirth by impressing upon them their "reliance upon God, the churches, and the ministers" during this time in their lives (Werking 290). With this justification, Mather establishes himself as a theologically necessary overseer of women's spaces.

By creating this theological requirement for women to rely on God and the male clergy to acceptably access reproductive power, Mather demonstrates a desire to gain enough ideological control over the birthing room to sufficiently monitor the space and ensure that women are only accessing power according to the bounds that Mather has set as acceptable. He fears that if he does not gain this control, women will be more likely to seek out ways to use their reproductive power to harm others through witchcraft due to their susceptibility to "spectral interference" (Gasser 8). Since he fears this potential misuse

of procreative power and the effects it could have on an unborn child, Mather supervises every aspect of the process of childbirth by delineating what women ought to be doing at each stage.

He prescribes how women should think, behave, and worship when they are only just “Sensible” that they have conceived, during their “*Praegnant Time*,” during the time of their “*Travail*” itself, and even after they are “*Delivered*” (240, 241, 245). Though he gives specific counsel for each stage, at all times during pregnancy he declares that women are to “Glorify God,” and bear any discomfort or pain associated with their pregnancy “with an Honourable *Patience*” (239, 244). By setting expectations and guidelines for women to follow at every moment during pregnancy, he paints a picture of what the ideal pregnant woman and birthing room should look like, thereby suggesting that anything else could “make a Strange Impression on the Infant; yea, on the very *Soul* of the Infant” and is therefore unacceptable before God (241). In so doing, Mather asserts control over what occurs both in and out of the birthing room and thoroughly strips women of their agency to exercise their own judgment regarding all aspects of pregnancy.

Conclusion

Mather’s demonstrated fear of the connection between women’s reproductive power and their potential access to occult power in “Retired Elizabeth” has important implications for Mather’s broader works. Mather’s fascination with the occult and personal involvement in the Salem witch trials is widely known and studied, but this analysis of “Retired Elizabeth” offers a new perspective, suggesting that his writings on witchcraft are informed by his underlying fear of women’s potential for evil when they are allowed to exercise procreative power outside the confines of male ecclesiastical authority. This reading therefore invites us to approach Mather and his broader works from this perspective and gain new insight into the rhetorical strategies and decisions he makes within his writings regarding women and witchcraft beyond “Retired Elizabeth” and *The Angel of Bethesda*. The potential connections between *The Angel of Bethesda* and Mather’s other works are therefore valuable avenues of study that have yet to be thoroughly explored.

Furthermore, if Mather is writing about these concerns and offering this level of detailed counsel on the subject as a pastor, then it is entirely possible and even

likely that his ministerial contemporaries in early 18th century Massachusetts were also worried about how the potential connections between childbirth and witchcraft might affect their parishioners. Whether or not this is the case remains to be researched and is certainly a point of inquiry that would benefit from greater exploration in future scholarship. Looking forward, it is clear that “Retired Elizabeth” has significant scholastic value as a point of convergence for studies regarding 17th and 18th century ideas of witchcraft, Puritan attitudes regarding women, and analyses of Cotton Mather’s works and person. Thus, despite its relative obscurity, “Retired Elizabeth” serves as a vital artifact that can be studied from multiple perspectives to provide relevant insight into the broader scope of early American literature and culture.

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