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“The Nurceries for Church and Common-wealth”

**A Reconstruction of Childhood, Children, and the Family
in Seventeenth-Century Puritan New England**

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Candidate for Senior Honors in History
Oberlin College
Advisor: Matthew R. Bahar
April 2014

To my New England families

“Amongst those who died about the end of this January, there was a girl of eleven years old, the daughter of John Ruggles, of whose family and kindred died so many that for some reason it was a matter of observation amongst us, who in the time of her sickness expressed to the minister and to those about her so much faith and assurance of salvation as is rarely found in any of that age, which I thought not unworthy here to commit to memory, and if any tax me for wasting paper with recording these small matters, such may consider that little mothers bring forth little children, small commonwealths matters of small moment, the reading where of yet is not to be despised by the judicious, because small things in the beginning of natural or politic bodies are as remarkable as greater in bodies full grown.”

Thomas Dudley to the Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln, March 12 and 28, 1630/1

“...where the said persons did in open Court assert their former practise to have been according to the mind of God, and that nothing that they had heard convinced them to the contrary, which practise (being also otherwise circumstanced, w[th] making infaunt baptisme a nullitje, & thereby making vs all to be vnbaptized persons, & so consequently no regular churches, ministry, or ordinances, and also renouncing all our churches as being so bad & corrupt that they are not fitt to be held co[m]union w[th] . . . all w[ch] to allow, would be the setting vp a free schoole for seduction into wayes of error, . . . & opening a doore for all sortes of abominations to come in among us, to the disturbance not only of our ecclesiasticall enjoyments, but also contempt of our civil order & the authority here established) doeth manifestly threaten the dissolution & ruine both of the peace & order of the churches & the authority of this government.”

Court of Assistants, May 27, 1668

“*Look to your Families*. Families are the Nurceryes for Church and Common-wealth, ruine Families, and ruine all. Order them well and the publick State will fare the better; the great wound and misery of *New-England* is that Families are out of Order. As to the generality of householders, Family Government is lost, & gone; . . . Children do not honour their parents, in that respect the *English* are become like unto the *Indians*. . . they that have Familyes, should learn to be diligent in Instructing of them, whilst they have an opportunity so to do; And this is the way to prevent Apostasy, for ignorance is the mother (not of devotion but) of Heresy”

Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven to the Present and Succeeding Generations* (1679)

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“The Nurceryes for Church and Common-wealth”

Introduction

“That wee, and our Seede, may live”

In the middle of the seventeenth century, in Dedham, Massachusetts, a “house firing” claimed the lives of three New England Puritans—“a woman and her son and daughter burned to death.” When the house caught fire, however, only the son was inside. John Hull, a New England merchant recorded the death in his diary, explaining why all three had perished. The mother ran into the house, “endeavoring to save her son,” despite the threat to her own life. The daughter, upon learning both her mother and her brother were trapped in the house, went in “to help both.” These New Englanders placed such importance on their family that they were willing to sacrifice their personal safety to attempt to preserve the lives of their kin. Though New England Puritans understood these deaths as potentially unnecessary tragedies, they could also recognize why the woman and the daughter had returned to the burning home, putting themselves in danger, to rescue their kin in the first place.¹ In order to understand episodes such as these, which riddle New England writings, this thesis focuses on the history of early New England through the lens of childhood. That is to say, it offers an analysis of how children and childhood were understood, constructed, reconsidered, and conceived of in seventeenth-century New England, and what effects these new conceptions had on Puritan society and discourse as a whole.

The changes in the understanding of childhood and children in colonial New England marked a swift and profound departure from English family norms prior to 1630. Casting off the

¹ John Hull, *Diaries of John Hull, Mint-Master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay*, in *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 3 ([Worcester, MA?], 1857), 183.

intellectual baggage of childhood and the family mores that had accompanied the Puritans across the Atlantic, New Englanders reconceptualized children as central to the mission in the wilderness. In this thesis, I argue that New Englanders connected, both implicitly and explicitly, the wellbeing of the colony's children directly with the future health of New England and sought to capitalize on this connection in unique, at times self-serving, ways. I focus principally on the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1630 and 1692, though I have given precedence to some early documents that reveal the rapidity with which these developments occurred, and I also include other Massachusetts settlements during the later periods of colonization. Surviving sources are vocal on the central position of children in the society, the importance of parents—supplemented by ministers—in successfully raising zealous New Englanders, and the role of secular authorities in protecting children from harm. The future health of New England, of course, meant different things to different groups of Puritans. To best serve their own visions of the future New England commonwealth, religious authorities, secular authorities, and parents and the 'common folk' throughout Massachusetts constructed contested meanings and goals that each group attached to and associated variously with children.

Though each group agreed on a new understanding of childhood, their differing interpretations and goals, and the contested ground on which these groups interacted, introduced into New England society intense and ultimately irreconcilable tensions between the community and the family. New England families were viewed as microcosms of the whole colony—each was “a little commonwealth”—and, consequently, their successes and failures were considered of the utmost import for the whole of New England.² Through examinations of these three

² William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), quoted in John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), frontmatter.

groups—religious authorities, secular authorities, and parents—I argue that divisions emerged primarily from discourses surrounding the significance, the protection, and the proper upbringing of children in seventeenth-century New England. These divisions would come to characterize the social life in many New England localities.

Secular authorities, individuals who occupied a position of power outside of the church, played an important role in defining the place of children in the new settlement. In New England, the Puritans were committed to the separation of civil and ecclesiastical power, and governors, other administrators, and the courts remained fundamentally interested in the smooth ordering of society. They wished to promote a hierarchical system of organization that would ensure continuity in the colony, and they saw the protection of children as an integral exercise in achieving New World-success. For sources within this group, I have relied on official governmental records from the Massachusetts Bay, especially court records that relate to children and family life. Unhesitant in extending their authority into the family, secular authorities sought to strengthen the Puritan foothold in Massachusetts from the lowest levels of society by condemning certain behaviors they understood as threatening to the health of New England's children.

Religious authorities, such as ministers, proved the most outspoken group throughout seventeenth-century Massachusetts in considering the importance of children to the success of settlement. They sought to promote theological homogeneity in New England through sermons both spoken and published. These so-called 'divines' engaged directly with congregations of New Englanders on a multitude of topics, though they placed particular emphasis throughout the seventeenth-century on the importance of the "rising generation" to the future religious health of the commonwealth. While all of the printed matter in the early years of settlement originated in

England, once New England secured a printing press in 1638, New Englanders printed prolifically. Ministers such as John Cotton, John Norton, Increase Mather, and his son, Cotton Mather, worked tirelessly and I have relied on their religious tracts and printed sermons that permeated the literary culture of seventeenth-century New England.

Finally, parents and the ‘common folk’ had their own understandings of children and their role in New England. This group is the most challenging to recover in the historical record, but their views and actions can be gleaned through correspondence, journals, diaries, secondary accounts, and books of record kept by New Englanders. Though they did not think as a coherent group in the same way that religious and secular authorities did, it is clear that they constructed their own understandings of children as central to the family and developed increasingly affective bonds within their tightly-knit kindred. These kinship networks came to characterize the way parents thought about children, as they sought to create a degree of stability for their offspring and descendants beyond the contemporary world. Parents were not impervious to religious and secular exhortations, but the ongoing nature of religious condemnations and court decisions points to the creation and persistence of ‘folk’ understandings of children within both the family and society that did not always mesh with authorities’ expectations.

The change in the understanding of children in seventeenth-century New England emerged in response to a number of unique circumstances west of the Atlantic. One concern of the Puritans was the prevalence of infant mortality that bedeviled settlements from Massachusetts’ inception. Demographic studies have estimated that between ten and thirty percent of children did not survive their first year in colonial Massachusetts. While this rate is similar to that of Europe, early New England’s isolation and fragility strengthened the emotional impact associated with such rampant infant death, which “operated to increase [parents’]

anxiety.”³ England was often looked upon as overcrowded and was well-established, so the death of an infant did not necessarily merit the anxious feelings that surrounded death in New England. As David Stannard has persuasively argued, “New Englanders not only appear to have been obsessed with the idea of death but they were acutely sensitive to its physical presence.”⁴ Death, especially among children, was an intrinsic part of the fabric of New England life. It introduced anxieties about the survival of the colony and, accordingly, the Puritans found new significance in infant death, constructed children as central to their success, and sought to protect children to achieve that goal.

The New England wilderness itself also compelled a change in Puritan attitudes towards children, as it contributed both to the high infant mortality rate and to parental and societal anxieties. Puritans came to the New England wilderness “hop[ing] to protect their children from profanity,” where they would “have the company of godly men like themselves.”⁵ ‘Wilderness’ carried both symbolic and theological meaning and New Englanders constructed their wilderness as “a veritable Canaan,” and themselves as the purposeful Israelites. The idealism surrounding the spiritual environment of New England, however, was quickly met with the harsh physical realities of the wilderness, including the presence of Indians and the eventual necessity of violent

³ Maris A. Vinovskis, “Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1860,” *The Journal of Economic History* 32, no. 1 (March 1972): 195-201. See also, David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. 55; Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. 127.

⁴ Stannard, *Puritan Way of Death*, 57.

⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 170.

conflict.⁶ The New World wilderness also required “Old World attitudes and concepts . . . to prove themselves anew” and served “as a conditioner of Old World thought in America.”⁷

Beginning as a refuge from England’s religious and social maladies, the wilderness quickly came to induce anxieties among New Englanders who were reminded repeatedly “of the uncertainties of the wilderness condition.”⁸ The New England environment colored the way settlers thought about children, ultimately leading them away from their “Old World attitudes and concepts” and towards new lines of thinking centered on the significance of children to their fragile settlements.

New England was formed and occupied by religious zealots who “were willing to endure hardship for only moderate gains in order to live in a religiously reformist society” and to make that mission exemplary to the whole world.⁹ In his famous speech, John Winthrop proclaimed of New England, “wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill. The eies of all people are uppon us.” He closed his remarks, urging the advancement of Puritan religious sensibilities as a means to assure survival: “Therefore lett us choose life, / that wee, and our Seede, / may live; by obeyeing his / voyce, and cleaveing to him, / for hee is our life, and / our prosperity.”¹⁰ In placing their fate firmly in the hands of God and extending His influence to the New World, Puritans hoped to ensure a lasting success.

⁶ When violence erupted, according to New Englanders, “nature itself seemed to contrive with the Indians to work the destruction of the colonists.” Alan Heimert, “Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier,” *New England Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (September 1953): 361, 372.

⁷ Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 1-2.

⁸ Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness*, 222.

⁹ David J. Silverman, review of *Peoples of a Spacious Land: Families and Cultures in Colonial New England* by Gloria L. Main, *New England Quarterly* 75 (December 2002): 690.

¹⁰ John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (Boston, 1838), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

Since the family was understood as a building block of society, in order to achieve and maintain an exemplary “Citty upon a Hill,” the community had to police its members and enforce proper religious, social, and political behavior both within and without the family.¹¹ The covenant with which the Puritans understood their relationship with God demanded “strict obedience to his laws.” Penalties for straying could be severe and swift. A central tenet of the covenant demanded a community made of wholly obedient individuals. Failure to honor the covenant by any individual, adult or child, “could result in the venting of God’s wrath on the entire community.”¹² Within this context, parents quickly introduced and explained the concepts of sin and death to their children, in an effort to avoid dooming the entire community. A healthy and vigilant Puritan settlement required children to obtain this knowledge early to prevent the potential threat posed by disobedient youth from materializing. Community members did not hesitate to locally enforce proper behavior, and they promoted homogeneity both officially and through unofficial, personal interaction in New England.

Historians have rarely recognized the importance of children to New Englanders, despite dedicating considerable scholarship to the topic of children and the family. John Demos’ germinal work, *A Little Commonwealth*, focused exclusively on family life in Plymouth Colony, but made few connections to social, political, and religious changes in New England.¹³ While *A Little Commonwealth*, along with the advent of the New Social History in the late 1960s, initiated a new era of scholarship devoted to family life in colonial days, it set a trend of treating the history of childhood solely from the perspective of the child and family, without considering the larger implications that views and understandings of children and childhood have on society

¹¹ On the family as a building block for society in New England, see Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 133.

¹² Stannard, *Puritan Way of Death*, 59-60.

¹³ John Demos, *Little Commonwealth*.

more broadly. Typical works ask what childhood was like, how parents viewed their children, what economic and social role a child played in the family, and whether or not New Englanders distinguished between children and other dependents.¹⁴ They engage in a longstanding debate about whether New Englanders recognized childhood as a distinct phase of life.¹⁵

Many scholars have pointed out the affective bonds that linked parents and children, despite the arguments that, to Puritans, children were “depraved and polluted.” David Stannard argues that a Puritan parent felt “genuine love for his or her children” and “a deep-seated

¹⁴ The distinctiveness of dependents has been a longstanding historiographical debate. John Demos argues that “For most purposes, especially at the level of everyday care and supervision, the master would perform as a surrogate parent,” which other scholars have taken to mean that parents and other authorities did not distinguish between servants and children. See Demos, *Little Commonwealth*, 108. For a recent argument that parents made no distinction, see M. Michelle Jarrett Morris, *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 209. Morris points to the frequency of servants and children mentioned together in sources as evidence, though there are many examples where only children are mentioned as well. New Englanders, in my view, did distinguish between these two dependent groups, as New England authorities spent considerably more time exhorting children of Puritan parents, than they spent on servants.

¹⁵ John Demos argues in *A Little Commonwealth* that “Childhood . . . was barely recognized in the period spanned by Plymouth Colony.” Children, he maintains, “were viewed largely as miniature adults: the boy was a little model of his father, likewise the girl of her mother.” Demos, *Little Commonwealth*, 57-58. For a scholarly rebuttal to Demos’ “miniature adulthood” claim, see Ross W. Beales, Jr., “In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 1975): 379-398, esp. 380, 397. David Stannard weighs in on the debate as well, concluding that Demos’ claim is “historical presentism at its very worst,” see Stannard, *Puritan Way of Death*, 45-46. Miniature adulthood is very clearly the wrong way to understand the views of the Puritans on childhood.

Not all scholarly works on the New England family in colonial days have failed to ask the larger questions, though, ironically, the rise of the New Social History in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a departure from such studies. For an account of New England family life that fits into Perry Miller’s Puritan declension narrative in its efforts to tie the family to the larger society more firmly, see Morgan, *Puritan Family*. A recent push has been made to tie the family more firmly to society. For Holly Brewer’s recent and compelling study that places children in the larger societal context, see Holly Brewer, *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

parental affection for children was the most common, normal, and expected attitude.”¹⁶ One scholar contends that depravity humanized Puritan children because it allowed parents to “relate emotionally to them as beings who were as morally flawed as adults.”¹⁷ Despite the high mortality rates, the looming presence of death, and the innate depravity that hounded New England’s children, parental love persisted within the family.

While most historical accounts of childhood in colonial New England confine themselves to considerations within the family and thus limit their explanatory power, I seek to extend the scope of inquiry to encompass the effects on society of changing conceptions of childhood and children. In reconsidering the significance of children, Puritans set in motion developments that would have far-reaching consequences throughout Massachusetts and New England. By exploring the significance of childhood beyond its role in the family—an exercise that has been largely ignored in the historiography of colonial New England—the impact of the historical child on past societies emerges as an integral driver of social, political, and religious change in New England.

In pursuit of this argument I organize my thesis by discussing secular authorities, religious authorities, and parents and ‘common folk’ in distinct chapters. Chapter One will briefly examine the intellectual inheritance of the New England Puritans as it concerned family life. It will introduce and trace English and European family mores prior to 1630. Chapters Two through Four focus on the three segments of New England society (secular, religious, and family) and the ways in which they constructed new understandings of childhood and children

¹⁶ Stannard, *Puritan Way of Death*, 51. See also Gloria L. Main, *Peoples of a Spacious Land: Families and Cultures in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Morgan, *Puritan Family*.

¹⁷ Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and in Life* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 23.

and departed from European lines of thought. These chapters examine the ways each group conceived of childhood and how that affected their behavior and the character of New England. Chapter Five will analyze the ways in which these three groups interacted in discussions related to childhood and how this introduced fundamental inconsistencies, incompatibilities, and irreconcilable tensions into New England society from an early period. Finally, I conclude with an examination of the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692, in which these tensions erupted in violence and left a tragically indelible mark on American history.¹⁸

Holly Brewer writes, “a common response to work on children has been to dismiss it as by definition irrelevant. When giving a paper at the Library of Congress in 1993, one senior historian, after hearing only the title of a talk that I was giving on Jefferson’s policies towards children, responded: ‘Some people will write on anything.’”¹⁹ Historians, as Brewer’s anecdote illuminates, have perpetuated the tendency to overlook the significance of children to past societies. But New Englanders, such as the early settler, Thomas Dudley, believed children worthy of comment, even if they feared those still in England might disagree. In a letter sent to England in 1631, Dudley wrote of an eleven-year-old girl who died several months earlier. He declared that the death “was not unworthy here to commit to memory.” He worried, however,

¹⁸ In an effort to treat and understand the Puritans on their own terms, I have made one stylistic choice regarding sources that warrants mention. I have left all spelling in its original, inconsistent form, except where shorthand was used, in which case I expand the words for the sake of ease. Maintaining the spelling used by New Englanders has a twofold effect. For one, it respects the tendencies of Puritan writers and therefore reflects a more accurate version of seventeenth-century New England. It also allows the voices of these men, women, and sometimes children, to survive and persist on their own terms. In those rare cases where the meaning of a passage could be difficult to grasp, I have included an explanation in a footnote. The nature of early modern English writing on both sides of the Atlantic is very different from our own—the reader can safely assume, when a word or a phrase is in quotations, that the spelling and grammar is original, and not a mistake on the author’s part.

¹⁹ Holly Brewer, “Children and Parents,” in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 236.

that his note would not be considered significant to the English and wrote in defense, “if any tax me for wasting paper with recording these small matters, such may consider that little mothers bring forth little children, small commonwealths matters of small moment . . . [but] small things in the beginning of natural or politic bodies are as remarkable as greater in bodies full grown.”²⁰

Dudley, like his fellow New Englanders, found significance in the wellbeing of the commonwealth’s children—they were, after all, understood as the future inheritors of the “Citty upon a Hill.” New Englanders did not consider children “small matters” and neither should historians of colonial New England. Children and childhood were reconsidered and reconstructed in New England, where they were recognized as immensely valuable and were situated firmly at the center of the commonwealth. The societal implications of childhood were profound in New England where such “small things” indeed had a “remarkable” impact “in bodies full grown.” This understanding was constructed from an early period and instilled in New England the value of the latent potential contained in every young soul.

²⁰ Thomas Dudley to the Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln, March 12 and 28 1630/1, in Everett Emerson, ed., *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638*, Commonwealth Series, ed. Winfred E. A. Bernhard, vol. 2 (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 77-78.

Chapter One

“Who would I willing spare?” Children, Family Life, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern England

Early in 1618, Nicholas Assheton’s wife was preparing to deliver a child near Downham, England. Assheton recorded in his diary the trials of the birthing day: “Her delivery was with such violence as the child died within half an hour.” Noting God’s mercy, Assheton “render[ed] all submissive, hearty thanks and praise to the only good and gracious God of Israel.” Assheton was not destroyed by the death of his child, mostly, it appears, because “God’s wonderful mercy,” had “spared [his wife] a while longer.” Around the same time, in Shoreditch parish, Nehemiah Wallington noticed a dearth of childbirths in which both the mother and the child survived. He reported hearing of “scarce two of a hundred that was sick with child that escaped death.” When his wife was one of the lucky few to safely birth a child, he framed his joy primarily around her survival. He explicitly recalled, “the great mercy of God is in the restoring of my wife to health and giving her safe deliverances in childbed.”¹ Both Assheton and Wallington were presented with the potential for tragic outcomes during the birthing process, and both counted themselves lucky when their wives survived. Given the state of the family in early modern England and Europe, it is unsurprising that these men did not concern themselves

¹ Birth and Death of a Child of Nicholas Assheton’s, 1618, in Ralph Houlbrooke, ed., *English Family Life, 1576-1716: An Anthology from Diaries* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 108; Some of Nehemiah Wallington’s Accounts of his Wife Grace’s Safe Deliverance in Childbed, 1622-7, in Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, 109.

primarily with their children. Instead, each man felt a surge of relief once his wife was safely beyond the perils of childbirth.

The greater concern shown by these men for their wives than their children helps to illuminate the mores of pre-1630, European family life, and particularly the conception of childhood and the role of the child in early modern society. This chapter provides a generalized account of the ideas and customs the settlers bound for New England brought with them.² The child in late medieval and early modern England, and Europe more broadly, occupied a marginal position in both the family and the society. Most children were dispensable and neither religious nor governmental authorities expended much effort to indoctrinate and protect them. Outside authorities rarely, if ever, reached into the family, choosing instead to leave children to their parents for rearing and protection. Parents, for their part, exhibited little affective behavior towards their children and understood them as expendable and replaceable—should a child be maimed or killed, another would not be far behind. Pre-1630 family mores lie in sharp contrast to the new constructions that would take place on New England’s shores following the Atlantic crossing.

Historians of the family have long bickered over the emergence of a distinct notion of childhood. Some scholars have insisted that the category of childhood did not exist, even as late

² For a more specific and in depth analysis of family life in medieval and early modern Europe (in all its complicated splendor), see Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450-1700* (New York: Longman, 1984); Ivy Pinchbeck & Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, vol. 1, *From Tudor Times to the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); Shulamit Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). This chapter leans heavily on these monographs.

as English colonization in North America.³ The existence of childhood seems to be a biological imperative, but some have argued that the tenuous grip children held on life “detracted from the importance of childhood as an age status.”⁴ Some medievalists, however, recognize categories that “correspond to childhood and adolescence,” pointing out that the baptism of infants, who were obviously incapable of understanding the purpose of the ritual, arose from a “negative view of childhood.” That is to say, not only did medieval people recognize the existence of a childhood, but also they had norms and theories that accompanied its existence and helped individuals make sense of it.⁵

Medieval norms and theories of the family informed the way that children were supposed to grow up and become adults. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the availability and popularity of child-rearing manuals was on the rise, due to an increasing “preoccup[ation] with rearing and educating children and youth so that they could successfully pass into the adult world.”⁶ Exactly when that adult world began is tricky to pinpoint, but clues exist: a 1654 recruitment order in Bristol demanded “two hundred able mariners, seamen and watermen being above the age of 15 years and under sixty.” The short and stunted nature of childhood and the lack of any legitimate notion of adolescence meant that adults expected children to accept a large degree of independence from an early age.⁷

³ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57-58.

⁴ In this understanding, age categories of childhood were irrelevant to adults, who focused instead on mere survival to an adult age. See Pinchbeck and Hewitt, *Children*, 7.

⁵ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 4; Shahar, *Childhood*, 3, 45.

⁶ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 6.

⁷ Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 237-238.

Child-rearing began as an intensive process, with the primary goals of independence and the “inculcat[ion of] an understanding and a reverence for hierarchy and authority.”⁸ Imparting these values often meant frosty relations between parents and children. The fifteenth-century writer Peter Idley asserted that ““A son must be kept as close as a bird in a cage . . . Laugh not with them, but keep them low; show them no merry cheer / Lest thou do weep with them also; but bring them up in fear.””⁹ Idley suggested that a patriarchal, God-like domination of the youth provided the only successful means to create a valuable adult. This exhortation for emotionally cold interactions continued to exemplify social relations through the sixteenth century, both within and without the parent-child bond. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century society made it very difficult for families to “establish close emotional ties” because of the tenuousness of life for infants and children, “which made it folly to invest too much emotional capital in such ephemeral beings.” Accordingly, when affection did enter into the relationship, it was only to the degree “which men today bestow on domestic pets.”¹⁰

Cool parent-child relations devoid of affection served primarily to inculcate due deference to the patriarchal system of late medieval and early modern family life and society. In late medieval London, the first lesson instilled in children was unsurprisingly the fifth commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother.” Londoners tended to interpret this commandment fairly strictly, though they also applied it to the master-apprentice relationship.¹¹ This tendency continued into the early modern period, where parents served as “God’s

⁸ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 85.

⁹ Peter Idley, quoted in Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 141.

¹⁰ Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, 99-105.

¹¹ Exodus 20:12 (AKJV); Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 85.

representative” in the home. Children were to adhere to the commandment primarily because it structured social relations from the most base level to the highest levels of the monarchy.

Obedience from children was required because it “guaranteed the perpetuation of the proper hierarchical order.”¹² The goal was to instill in the child a sense of his or her proper place, which was “predicated on their role in the kinship structure rather than on emotional response to him or her as an individual.”¹³

Though outside authorities occasionally made efforts to standardize and improve child-rearing practices, understandings of childhood and children as marginal within society persisted into the early modern period. Despite occasional moments of tolerance and brief episodes of affection, “the uniqueness of the individual and the open-ended possibilities of behavior and achievement” remained “actively discouraged rather than stressed” into the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Children were to be unassuming, dutiful, and mostly ignored until they emerged as capable adults.

In an effort to effectively and efficiently produce functional, responsible, and deferential adults, parents often sent their children out of the home for apprenticeships. Some scholars have argued that boarding children in other houses was “a last resort,” but it seems more likely, based on the sheer number of children who grew up in environments away from their parents, that this was an accepted, standard, and common practice. Some estimates dictate that up to two out of

¹² Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 145 (“God’s representative”); Shahar, *Childhood*, 169 (“guaranteed”).

¹³ Miriam Slater, *Family Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Verneys of Claydon House* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 28.

¹⁴ Slater, *Family Life*, 28. For examples of affection, see Shahar, *Childhood*, 19, 106. For an argument that a “child-oriented” family was part of the “religious ideology of the Christian Church from a very early period,” see Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. 153.

three households in the early modern period had a youthful boarder.¹⁵ Historians have offered wildly varied interpretations of the reasoning behind this practice. One scholar asserts that parents could be reluctant to impose necessary punishments on their own offspring, so they sent them away to be properly trained and disciplined.¹⁶ Another argues that children were a “currency in a reciprocal exchange between two adults.” In this model, the satisfaction of the adults was given priority over the feelings of the child about the exchange.¹⁷

The feelings of children who spent time away from their parents, as servants or apprentices, are difficult to uncover in the sources, but they are easily hypothesized. One historian argues that these youth were likely exposed to “almost limitless sadism from their masters,” and points to a girl “who was stripped naked, strung up by her thumbs and given twenty-one lashes; ... another who was flogged, salted and then held naked to a fire” among many other equally depraved examples. The relationship between a master and an apprentice was quite clearly one in which the master held a preponderance of power and the apprentice’s station granted him or her few options for protection or recompense. While governmental authorities intervened in the most outrageous and excessive cases of violence, it was generally agreed that some amount of physical punishment was necessary to instill obedience in apprentices. Indeed, the proper functioning of the master-apprentice relationship rested on the tenet that masters would physically discipline their apprentices when necessary.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 60; Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, 167.

¹⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 75-79.

¹⁷ Slater, *Family Life*, 57.

¹⁸ For these and other examples, see Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, 167. See also Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 157, 184.

Late medieval and early modern courts did, on occasion, intervene in the case of extreme brutality on the part of a master. More often, however, neighbors who witnessed public discipline intervened if they felt the master had gone too far. Though this did not change behavior in the long term, it often proved sufficient in preventing further damage in the short.¹⁹ When courts did act, it was rarely more than formality. Though any apprentice's death would bring the master under immediate suspicion and scrutiny, deaths rarely resulted in a conviction. In one case, an eleven-year-old apprentice died of head wounds, which the master blamed on a fight that had broken out between his apprentice and "one innocent' who was twelve years old." The fight ended when the apprentice fell down the stairs and died. Despite the master's acquittal, the family of the apprentice remained suspicious.²⁰ Legal authority tended to land on the side of the master in an effort to promote proper hierarchical function, at the cost of the wellbeing of children.

Many children did not survive long enough to be apprenticed outside of the house. High mortality rates made the death of infants a large part of the fabric of European life through the early modern period. According to one estimate, as many as one out of five children under the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and one out of four under the Stuarts (1603-1714) did not survive to age ten.²¹ As a result, parents tended to delay or reserve feelings of love for young children of tender years. As late as the mid-seventeenth century, when Ralph Josselin's ten-day-old son died, he reported that the boy was "the youngest, and our affections not so wanted unto it." Other parents were equally terse, as in the case of Daniel Fleming's mention of his son's

¹⁹ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 67.

²⁰ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 160-161, 256n13.

²¹ Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 136.

death: “Paid for my loving and lovely son John’s coffin: 2s. 6d.”²² Through the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, it remained “futile to grieve in the face of infant deaths,” as they “were so common that it was not to be the custom until later in the [seventeenth] century to mourn them formally.”²³ The death of an infant or a young child of tender years in late medieval and early modern Europe was a common event, and the understandings, treatments, and reactions surrounding it reflected its very normalcy.

In rare cases, efforts to discipline a child could result in death. As a child grew, discipline came to occupy a more and more central role in the socialization process. The adage “Spare the rod, and spoil the child” informed parent-child and adult-child interaction and was considered, within limits, a necessary part of the child-rearing process. In one instance, a five-year-old Londoner, John, was at his neighbors house when he stole a piece of wool. “[C]hastising him,” his neighbor “struck the said John with her right hand under his left ear.” The boy died before nightfall. The case came to court where a jury acquitted the woman, judging the violence to be “a misadventure, a necessary disciplinary action.” In its reference to the death blow as “necessary” the court demonstrated its tendency to uphold physical discipline as a necessary means of raising children, even in cases where such behavior resulted in the death of a child.²⁴

Another contributing factor to the high mortality rate for children was accidental death. Medieval and early modern Europe was far from a safe place for children. One writer urged parents to be aware of the likelihood of accidents: “Look thou keep thee from fire and water. /

²² Ralph Josselin, quoted in Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 136; Daniel Fleming, quoted in Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, 105.

²³ Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 155 (“futile to grieve”); Slater, *Family Life*, 121 (“were so common”).

²⁴ John’s neighbor, quoted in Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 66; Hanawalt, *Growing Up* 66 (“a misadventure”).

Be ware and wise how thou look / Over any brink, well, or brook. / And when thou standest at any schate / Be ware and wise that thou catch no stake; / For many child without dread, / Through evil heed is deceived or dead.”²⁵ The external world posed many dangers to young children and the surviving records contain many references to accidental death. One unlucky London infant was left swaddled in a cradle, when a pig came into the house and fatally bit her. Though pigs were “strictly forbidden to wander the streets of London,” the law was rarely enforced, to the detriment of the city’s infants.²⁶ Courts seldom intervened with a conviction or an order when accidental death occurred; instead, preventing accidents remained the responsibility of parents, as moralists warned them of the potential for danger.²⁷

Parents often fell victim to the high mortality rate as well, leaving children without guardians. The treatment of orphans in late medieval and early modern England suggests they had little value. Although some towns, including London, made an effort to protect the interests of orphans as early as the thirteenth century, courts tended to lose interest once issues of inheritance were resolved. A few lucky orphans were left in the care of interested kinsfolk, while the vast majority, for all intents and purposes, were left alone.²⁸ Abandoning children was not illegal in secular law, but municipal courts on occasion punished the act, provided they could identify the responsible individual. In medieval times, church authority provided the largest

²⁵ Symon, quoted in Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 74. A schate is a fence.

²⁶ Hannawalt, *Growing Up*, 64. For other examples, such as a six-year-old who fell into scalding water, a child who drowned while bathing, and deaths in fires, see *ibid.*, 74-75.

²⁷ Shahar, *Childhood*, 139. On rare occasion, lay courts made efforts to respond to and prevent future accidents that left infants dead. For an unusual case, in which a court ordered townspeople to close off a well where a London child had drowned, see *ibid.*, 142.

²⁸ Houlbrooke, *English Family*, 222.

penalty for abandonment—those who abandoned a child would be excommunicated.²⁹ The vast majority of orphans in late medieval and early modern Europe could not expect to be looked after or cared for by authorities, and this tendency continued well into the seventeenth century.³⁰

Throughout the late medieval and early modern period in England, the emphasis remained primarily on raising children to understand and fill their proper place within society and to instill in them a proper respect for authority. To accomplish these ends, childhood could often be a frightful place. At the very heart of conceptions of childhood was a fundamental “incompatibility.” On the one side, authorities emphasized “the deference and submission the young owed their parents and masters,” while on the other, authorities placed emphasis on “their early independence.”³¹ Parents sought to inculcate proper values and respect for the patriarchy into their children and often accomplished these tasks through cold, impersonal relationships. Many children died before they reached independence, whether by violence, accident, or disease; some were forced to adopt an early independence when they were sent out of their childhood home as a boarder, servant, or apprentice; still others were doomed to early independence when their parents died, leaving them orphaned. In short, children were marginal, disposable members of society who only gained importance and value once they became deferential, respectful, and productive adults.

²⁹ Shahar, *Childhood*, 126.

³⁰ In seventeenth-century England, as Virginia grew stronger and more profitable, the plight of orphans only worsened. Authorities began to covertly approve the “spiriting” of parentless children to the Chesapeake, exploiting them as a cheap source of labor. According to Peter Wilson Coldham, “It is a reasonable inference that the offence of kidnapping children for labor in the colonies was not regarded by the justices as a particularly serious offence—certainly less heinous than the theft of a horse.” The “spiriting” continued unabated until a 1645 ordinance sought to minimize the practice. See Peter Wilson Coldham, “The ‘Spiriting’ of London Children to Virginia: 1648-1685,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 3 (July 1975): 280.

³¹ Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 238.

Even as late as 1625 these norms continued to characterize and structure a child's place in the family and in society in England. Just a few years before the English settlement of the Massachusetts Bay, Nehemiah Wallington, that lucky soul whose wife and child were spared, undertook a strange "meditat[ion]" in his diary. He asked himself, "What if the sickness should come into this house: who would I willing spare?" . . . 'The maid. Who next? My son John. Who next? My daughter Elizabeth. Who next? Myself.'" In his dispassionate and succinct choices, Wallington reveals a great deal about his conception of childhood and his feelings for his children. Later on, he asked himself, "But what if God should strike thy wife or thy father, or thy Brother John? How would I take it then?" Unable to answer himself adequately, Wallington wrote, "Many tears I did shed with these thoughts; and I desired the Lord if it might stand with his glory and my soul's good that I might die first and never see that day."³² Nehemiah Wallington considered his children dispensable and could "spare" them with ease—his contemporaries would not have been shocked. In New England, however, such notions of children would rapidly transform into a relic of a harsher past.

³² Nehemiah Wallington's Accounts, in Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, 142.

Chapter Two

“Findeing him meate drinke & ap[par]jell” Secular Authorities, Children, and Parents in Seventeenth-Century New England Courts

At seven o'clock on the morning of April 25, 1629, Francis Higginson, one of the most preeminent of the early transatlantic passengers, boarded the *Talbot* with his wife and eight children and “hoisted up sail from graues end [near London],” setting out for Massachusetts.¹ Throughout the voyage, Higginson kept a log, which detailed happenings while the English were afloat on the Atlantic. For weeks the crew wrestled with an easterly wind, before, on May 13, they finally “left [their] dear native soil of England behind.” Higginson took special care to acknowledge this monumental moment, “And this to be noted,” he wrote, “that all this while our passage hath been upon the coast of England and so ought truly [this day] to be accounted the first day of our parting with old England.” Higginson’s wife became seasick as soon as England had disappeared over the horizon, and two of his children, Samuel and Mary, contracted smallpox and purpura on May 17, a Sabbath day.²

On May 19, as the sun began to set over the bow of the *Talbot*, Mary's situation grew more dire. Blue spots increased in size and number as the illness gained strength, and the pox ultimately overcame her. Her father reported the death impersonally: “the child died about six of

¹ Francis Higginson to His Friends in England, July 24, 1629, in Everett Emerson, ed., *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638*, Commonwealth Series, edited by Winfred E. A. Bernhard, vol. 2 (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 11-13; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *The Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols. in 6 (Boston: 1853-4), vol. 1, 386.

² Higginson to His Friends in England, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 15.

the clock at night, being the first in our ship that was buried in the bowels of the great Atlanticke Sea.” For her father, the child was “pitiful to see,” and thus her parents “had cause to take her death as a blessing from the Lord to shorten her misery.” Earlier that Tuesday, Higginson recorded in his log, “This day the master of our ship, myself, and another went aboard the *Lions whelp* where mister Gibs made us welcome with bountiful entertainment.” While Mary lived her last day, her father amused himself elsewhere, with no apparent regrets.³

Though Higginson's actions are no doubt shocking to modern readers, his behavior would have been no surprise to his contemporaries. Given the intellectual inheritance of parent-child relations in late medieval and early modern England, and considering the size of his family, Higginson's reaction is quite understandable, even normal. Indeed, the only record he leaves of any emotional disturbance reads almost as an afterthought. “It was a grief to us her parents,” he wrote, “and a terror to all the rest as being the beginning of a contagious disease and mortality.” Despite his daughter's death, Higginson remained concerned with the best interests of the community, which he would have understood as his ultimate purpose both in Massachusetts and during the Atlantic crossing.⁴

What Higginson did not understand, nor did he likely ever fully grasp, as he died just over a year after his arrival in Massachusetts, was that children would take on a new significance, importance, and centrality in the Massachusetts Bay and, more broadly, in Puritan New England as a whole. Recognizing the importance of children to their goals of strengthening the New England commonwealth, Puritan governmental authorities departed from the norms that

³ The *Lions whelp* and the *Talbot*, which traveled together, were two of the five ships that carried the 1629 planters across the Atlantic Ocean. See Higginson to His Friends in England, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 13-16. Mary had evidently been plagued with physical issues since shortly after her birth. She grew into a crooked back, with loose hips and bent knees, according to her father.

⁴ Higginson to His Friends in England, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 16.

characterized family life in England. Secular authorities instead cast their legal net wider in an effort to protect the best interests of children, and, in that way, to protect the best interests of the colony. To achieve stability and growth, Puritan legal authorities extended their influence much further into the family than had previous governments in England, which rarely concerned themselves with such small matters as children.

Authorities in the newly established Massachusetts Bay Colony almost immediately recognized the importance of children to the “Errand into the Wilderness,” as Perry Miller has termed the seventeenth-century Puritan activities in New England.⁵ The wilderness conditioned “Old World thought,” and it played an important role in the changing conceptions of childhood in New England.⁶ Where in England children were plentiful and society was firmly established, the wilderness in which New Englanders found themselves increased the anxiety related to the fragility of their settlements. Anxieties precipitated new understandings of childhood, as secular authorities quickly recognized the importance of children to the future hopes and prospects of New England. While children in England were dispensable and marginal, the protection of New England’s children became of paramount and central importance to advance the interests of the commonwealth. Secular authorities acted on this new conception from an early period.

In sharp contrast to the treatment of orphans in English courts, New England’s Court of Assistants, the first and most industrious judicial body in New England, sought to protect the best interests of children whose parents were dead.⁷ As early as 1634, the court took

⁵ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

⁶ Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629-1700* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 1-2.

⁷ The court’s “Bench was the Magistrates, a body characterized not so much by profound legal learning or judicial distinction, as by plain sense, a rugged idea of justice, integrity, and a standing

responsibility for a son whose father had died on the Atlantic crossing, ordering that the new guardian “shall bring vpp John Stanley sonne of John Stanley disceased, findeing him meate drinke & ap[par]ell till hee shall accomlishe the age of xxi yeares.”⁸ In such cases, the Court of Assistants ensured that the new guardians would have sufficient funds to raise the children properly, revealing its predisposition towards the protection of children. The fragility of New England and the goal of propagating the gospel within it necessitated this new development.

The Court of Assistants also began to assert its authority over unborn children in its efforts to ensure proper family structures for all children. The Court of Assistants’ rulings in adultery cases often mirrored its handling of orphans. In 1643, William Flint, “haveing gotten a slutt with child” was fined twenty pounds, ten of which went directly to the town of Salem “to bring vp the child with.” Flint was imprisoned until he paid his fine for the security of the unborn child.⁹ The practice had not changed when, in 1680, the Court convicted George Russell of fornication with Mary Pemberton. In addition to his fine of ten pounds, Russell was bound to give “fiuety pounds mony to secure this Toune of Boston & county from damage as to the maintenance of the child.” The Court did not know if Mary Pemberton would become pregnant, but even an unborn child was significant and central to the Puritan errand.¹⁰ The Court of Assistants tacitly recognized the latent potential of children, both born and unborn, to grow into

derived from eminent public service in various capacities.” See *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1901-1928), vol. 1, preface, iv-v, x.

⁸ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 51. John Stanley’s sister, Rueth Stanley was disposed of in a similar fashion, but with a different guardian. This is one of the earliest of many examples of the Court of Assistants intervening in society to protect the best interests of orphaned children. See also *ibid.*, 67, 95, for additional early examples.

⁹ This practice seems to be an early form of child support, and was policed more heavily than it had been in medieval and early modern England. *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 137.

¹⁰ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 1, 169-70.

full-fledged, upstanding Puritan men and women and sought to protect these potential Puritans as effectively as possible.

Puritan secular authorities often banished individuals from New England, especially when one failed to uphold the expectations and responsibilities to ensure the protection and proper upbringing of his or her children. In March of 1671, the Court of Assistants tried the case of Walter Barefoot who was brought to “Answer . . . for his profane Swearing.” The Court deemed his “prophaine & Horrid Oathes” worthy of a twenty shilling fine, but, during the trial, it also came to light “that he left his wife & two Children in England” when he came to New England. This revelation harshened Barefoot’s sentence, as the court ordered “him forthwith to Return to England by the first ship.”¹¹ Intent on protecting the sanctity of the family as the most effective means of replicating their exemplary society, New England authorities hastily intervened to protect the welfare of children when they discovered parents who failed to fulfill their proper familial roles.

When household governance did not measure up to the expectations of New England’s governmental authorities, courts had no qualms about acting to restore order. In 1639, a woman named Jane Robinson slipped in her familial obligations. The Court of Assistants noted her shortcomings, convicting her of “disorder in her house, drunkennes, & light behavior,” all of which they interpreted as a direct threat to the wellbeing of her children to whom she provided a less than exemplary model. The Court “censured [her] to bee severely whiped,” which, though not recorded, would have taken place in public where her punishment could be a warning to

¹¹ XCVIII. [from the “County Court Papers (Exeter, N.H.) 1674-1677, Folio 333,” now deposited in the State Archives at Concord, N.H.], in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 3, 211-212.

others.¹² Since the Court disapproved of the example she set for her children, they did not hesitate to make her an example for other Puritans who might neglect their obligations to their household and their children.

When external factors threatened children, courts were quick to maintain their wellbeing. New England courts often acted to ensure the health of children and families whose crops were impacted by blights or droughts.¹³ When families faced a punishing winter without sustenance, the Court of Assistants made efforts to protect and secure them from danger. In these decisions, the Court often made note of the individual's dependents, as in a 1640 ruling that "Evan Thomas haveing a wife, & four children is alowed twenty bushells of corne at harvest."¹⁴ The record does not reveal the hardship that had befallen the Thomas family, but the Court sought to ensure the good health of the four Thomas children by intervening to maintain the family's security in order to protect the best interests of the commonwealth.

New England courts also inserted their authority into families to protect children from potentially deadly accidents arising from the many dangers in the wilderness of New England. Such interventions were rare indeed in early modern England, where the accidental deaths of children were often met with reactions closer to apathy than concern. The rare case that did enter the courts in England was often dismissed for lack of evidence or testimony. The Court of Assistants, spurning these English norms, often reached into the family to investigate the deaths of children. This was particularly true in cases of accidental death: when children died of

¹² A Court of Assistants or Quarter Court held at Boston the 3th of the 10th m[o], 1639, in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 89.

¹³ New England was particularly vulnerable to environmental conditions because of its agricultural, subsistence-based economy.

¹⁴ A quarter Court held at Boston the first of the 7th m[o] 1640, in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 97.

unnatural causes, courts often tried those responsible as murderers. Given the nature of the wilderness in the seventeenth century, a preventable death was a miserable waste. The wilderness condition ensured “the possibility and even the likelihood” of a child’s “imminent death.” Because “death was an ever-threatening, ever-present condition to [Puritans] ... and the lives of children were seen as particularly fragile,” preventable deaths induced anxiety and were doubly tragic.¹⁵

In some accidental deaths, the Court of Assistants found individuals to blame for negligence that cost a child his or her life. Authorities fined Thomas Ewar and Edmond Hubberd Sr for “leaving a pit open in w^{ch} a child was drowned,” in 1638.¹⁶ It would have been difficult for either man to anticipate a child wandering into the pit, but New Englanders were, by 1638, already expected to take preventive measures against such tragedies. By punishing these men, the Court of Assistants created a precedent that emphasized both the welfare of children and the duty of all individuals to secure it. Children were no longer relegated to an afterthought as they so often had been in England. Instead, courts refashioned the child as a potential Puritan—a creature meant to occupy the center of New England society and to constantly remain in the thoughts of New Englanders.¹⁷

¹⁵ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 57, 65.

¹⁶ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 75.

¹⁷ Many cases of accidental death appear in New England’s court records. In one particularly grim case, Richard Sylvester’s child, in “a very sad accident at Weymouth,” shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun while his parents were at an assembly and his older brother was tending to cattle. The case was tried in the Court of Assistants, but the verdict went either unrecorded or did not survive in the records. John Winthrop recorded the event in his journal and noted the sadness of the story. For the court record, see *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 77. For Winthrop’s account, see John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal: “History of New England,” 1630-1649*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), vol. 2, 72.

Incidents of violence that were intentionally aimed at children proved even more shocking and tragic to New England authorities. Courts responded with vehemence in cases of infanticide, which was understood as a crime against the weak child and the colony as a whole. Elizabeth Emmerson, a single woman, was convicted for murdering with “malice forethought” her two newborn “Bastard Children,” using “a small Bagg or cloath sewed up,” and “secretly bury[ing]” them. The incident shocked and dismayed the court, which demanded “That sentance of Death be pronounced agt. her.”¹⁸ Most infanticide cases resulted in similar pronouncements, as New England’s courts sought to prevent future incidences of infanticide and to make an example of those men and women who attempted it.

New Englanders, suspicious over any infant's death, brought many presumed child murderers into court for trial. Even when the individual was found not guilty, the court often handed down a censure, as in the case of “Elisabeth Payne spinster” who was found not guilty of “murdering hir child.” She was, however, as the court was quick to point out, “greatly negligent in not Calling for help for the preservation of the childs life.”¹⁹ Payne escaped with her life, but the court still rebuked her for inaction that had cost New England a child. Legal authorities in New England acted swiftly in uncovering, condemning, and punishing those who were suspected of committing infanticide.

New England courts acted with similar rapidity and severity in cases of sexual crimes against children. In 1639, a Boston Quarter Court tried John Kempe who made “filthy vncleane attemts wth 3 yong girls.” The Court sought to make an example of his shocking crimes, so they sentenced him to be “whipped both heare [in Boston], at Roxberry & at Salem very severely.” In

¹⁸ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 1, 357.

¹⁹ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 1, 228.

an effort to prevent similar crimes, Kempe was punished publicly around New England, and then “comitted for a slave.”²⁰ Another man, Patrick Jeanison, was tried for “Carnall copulation wth a child vnder tenn yeares of Age,” a crime so unexpected and horrifying that New England did not yet have laws prohibiting it.²¹ Forced to create a law to prevent such offenses, the “Deputyes” determined that “Carnall Copulation with a woman child under the age of ten yeares is a more haynous sin then with one of more yeares.” The crime, to these New England authorities, was “more Inhumane & vnnaturall in it selfe & also more perilous to the life & wellbeing of the child.”²² Jeanison's crime, understood as inherently threatening to the future of the colony, was made punishable by death as Puritan legal authorities sought to protect the sanctity and wellbeing of children in New England.

The legal authorities of New England extended their efforts to protect children beyond New Englanders, even working to protect Indian children who lived in praying towns. Praying towns were New England's version of Indian missions, where only Indians who worked toward conversion to the Puritan way could dwell. To accomplish their goals in these towns, New England authorities often intervened when laws were broken. In 1673, a grand jury found an Indian named Twenty Rod “guilty of rauishing an Indian Girle about 9 yeares of age.” Twenty Rod defended himself, but did not deny the crime, instead “excuseing him selfe yt if he did it, he was in drink.” The Court sentenced him to be sold into slavery in the Caribbean, and vowed that

²⁰ A Quarter Courte held at Boston the 3th day of the 7th month @ 1639, in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 2, 86.

²¹ New England had a law that made "a rape on ye body of [a child] aboue tenn yeares" a "Capital" offense, but did not have a law protecting children aged under ten years. See Att A Court of Asistants held at Boston 7th 7ber, in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 1, 199.

²² (Mass. Archives, Vol. 39, No. 365), in *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 3, 200.

if he should return to New England he would “be put to death.”²³ Indian children who resided in praying towns were understood, like their New England peers, as having the potential to grow into upstanding Puritan members of New England.²⁴ As such, legal authorities felt a responsibility to protect them from harm and took action to accomplish this task.

Throughout the seventeenth century in New England, Puritan legal authorities sought to ensure the best interests of the future colony by protecting the best interests of New England’s children. They did so by responding severely and efficiently when the safety of children was threatened either externally, as in the cases of crop shortages or accidental deaths, or internally, as in the cases of violence aimed at children. When New Englanders failed to uphold a well-ordered household, the courts extended their authority to instill proper functioning in families. Children were indeed crucial to the future of New England and courts, recognizing their central significance, sought to ensure that future through its myriad interventions on behalf of children.

²³ *Records of the Court of Assistants*, vol. 3, 216-217.

²⁴ Race categories did not yet dominate and permeate Puritan society during the early years of settlement, though New England Puritans were certainly very ethnocentric. Puritans understood Indians as changeable and capable of achieving and accepting civilization.

Chapter Three

“Even the *Little Children* may *mind* them” The Role of Children in Puritan Religious Discourse

One of the first New England tracts that sought to catechize the youth of the colony was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1656. Penned by John Cotton, one of New England’s preeminent ministers, “*Spiritual MILK FOR BOSTON BABES In either ENGLAND*” laid out Puritan doctrine as those of tender years on both sides of the Atlantic were meant to digest it. The treatise enjoyed much success and was published in New England throughout the seventeenth century. Though the “late teacher” did not survive to see his tract published, his words prospered in New England, contributing to the formation of a new—and rapidly growing—religious discourse surrounding children.¹

In typical catechistic fashion, Cotton organized his manual by posing and answering the questions he found most relevant and necessary to the children of New England. Of course the catechism also included the Ten Commandments and the inherent nature of sin in humans: “*Q. Whether have you kept all these Commandments? / A. No, I and all men are sinners. / Q. What is the wages of Sin? / A. Death and damnation.*” How shocking Cotton’s confession that he had sinned may have been to children is impossible to know, but it seems likely that this revelation

¹ John Cotton, *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes. In either England: Drawn out of the breasts of both Testaments for their Souls nourishment. But may be of like use to any Children.* (Cambridge, 1656), Title Page. John Cotton’s tract was also published in 1684, and this copy is much easier to read. Note: Italicization and capitalization have both been preserved and left as originally presented in the seventeenth century. Seventeenth-century religious tracts from New England look particularly peculiar to modern readers because of the ways in which publishers and writers used italics and capital letters. I discuss the reasons behind my choice to maintain Puritan style in a footnote in the introduction.

came as a surprise, and perhaps with relief, given the harsh nature of Puritan theological discourse in New England. Lest his young readers continue in sin, Cotton ended his catechism with “the reward” all would receive. He wrote, “The Righteous shall go into life eternal, and the wicked shall be cast into everlasting fire with the Devil and his Angels.”² John Cotton, like his fellow ministers, recognized the importance of New England’s children and he sought to inculcate in them Puritan ideals from an early age.

The increased importance of childhood grew out of a key goal of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay to maintain a physical presence that upheld the key tenets of Calvinist, congregational theology in the New World. While the constant demographic influx of new colonists from old England steadily grew in the first few years of the Massachusetts settlement, religious authorities increasingly turned their focus to children in an effort to replicate prescribed values of the Puritan mission in the wilderness.³

Childhood, not previously understood in England as a profoundly impactful period of life, came to be viewed as a crucial phase in New England—and ministers sought to instill Puritan doctrine from an early age. The conceptions and understandings of childhood communicated in New England’s religious discourse highlighted the importance of children to the mission of Puritan New England as a whole. At times harsh, at times more lenient, Puritan ministers in New England toiled above all to advance their faith in the wilderness and the New World. As children came to occupy a more central role in society as the future inheritors and caretakers of the commonwealth, ministers increasingly extended their authority into the family

² Cotton, *Spiritual Milk*, 6, 13.

³ For an award-winning analysis of demographic changes in New England, as well as an interesting discussion on the many motivations for leaving England, see Virginia DeJohn Anderson, “Migrants and Motives: Religion and the Settlement of New England, 1630-1640,” *The New England Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (September 1985): 339-383.

in an effort to promote theological standardization and advance the cause of Puritanism in New England.

One reason that children figured so prominently in religious discourse and in the minds of ministers was due to the intense preoccupation with backsliding among New England religious authorities. Cotton Mather recorded “an Impudent Speech, but a True and a Sad one, uttered by a Young Varlet, who when his *Father* said, *Never any man had such a Wicked Son*; reply’d, *Yes, my Grand father had.*”⁴ No doubt such stories frightened zealous Puritans who worried over the prospects of regression into regularity and anonymity almost constantly. Backsliding was particularly offensive because it destroyed and undermined the foundation in the wilderness that a generation of New Englanders struggled to create. Temptations abounded for New England’s children, but religious authorities most dreaded “that the greatest part of this Generation would comply, and disown that cause which their Fathers suffered for.”⁵

As early as 1653, and likely even earlier, ministers began to preach on the dangers of going astray. Michael Wigglesworth, a Puritan minister and popular poet, recorded in his diary, “Mr. Hook preaching out of 3 Jeremiah 22. 23 Return ye backsliding children &c.” Wigglesworth was particularly concerned with failure, and he kept a close eye on himself, recording his setbacks throughout his diary. He feared particularly his “want of natural affection

⁴ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents. Or, Counsels & Comforts For Godly Parents Afflicted with Ungodly Children; And Warnings unto Children to Beware of all those Evil Courses, Which would be Afflictive unto their Parents.* (Boston, 1695), 19.

⁵ Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven To the Present and Succeeding Generations Or A Discourse Wherein is shewed, I. That the Children of Godly Parents are under special Advantages and Encouragements to seek the Lord. II The exceeding danger of Apostasie, especially as to those that are the Children and Posterity of such as have been eminent for God in their Generation. III. That Young Men ought to Remember God their Creator.* (Boston, 1679), 63.

and pity to my afflicted parents.”⁶ Though he was saddened by the illness of his parents, he recognized that his backsliding would erase the good work they had done in New England. Regression was a constant anxiety for Wigglesworth, as it was for many Puritan ministers in the Massachusetts Bay. They needed children to uphold the religious zeal that accompanied the first group of English across the Atlantic. Since children would inherit the colony, their successful training and upbringing was indispensable to the health of New England settlements.

In the wilderness of New England, religious leaders, anxious to maintain Puritan doctrine, often made children the focal point of their concerns. More vulnerable than their elder counterparts, children could potentially pose threats to other members of societies—in Puritan thought, one soul could doom a community—and the young were seen as particularly susceptible to temptation. As Cotton Mather pointed out, “The Devil, who is an Enemy to *all* men, is to *young* men a peculiar Enemy . . . because the Devil sees a great *likelihood* of prevailing on *young* men.” Mather also made the connection between this vulnerability and its larger implications: “The gaining of *young* men thereunto, is a thing more signally useful to the *Kingdom* of the Devil.”⁷ Understandably, ministers and other religious authorities feared the consequences children could bring about as the weakest and most corruptible members of society.

In fact, religious authorities in New England formulated childhood as a central stage of training and thus understood children as most important to the health of the community and the

⁶ Michael Wigglesworth, “The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth,” in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 35, *Transactions, 1942-1946* (Boston: The Society, 1951), 332.

⁷ [Cotton Mather], *Addresses To Old Men, and Young Men, and Little Children. In Three Discourses I. The Old Mans Honour; or, The Hoary Head found in the way of Righteousness. A Discourse Recommending unto Old Men, A Saving Acquaintance with the Lord Jesus Christ. II. The Young Man's Glory; or Wreath of Graces for the Head of Youth. A Discourse Recommending unto Young Men, A blessed Victory over the Devil. III. The Little Childs Lesson; Or, A Child wise unto Salvation. A Discourse instructing and inviting Little Children to the Exercises of Early Piety. To which may be added, A short Scriptural Catechism, accommodated unto their Capacities.* (Boston, 1690), 52-57.

colony at large. Cotton Mather's father, Increase, posed the question, "[W]hat shall be done, that so succeeding Generations in *New-England* may not forsake the Lord God of their Fathers?" In his answer, he placed the emphasis on the responsibility shared by authorities, so-called "*Corner stones*" on which "the safety of the whole building (under God) depends." Mather's "*Corner stones*," the ministers, were to expend their energy primarily on children. Because they saw children as crucial to the health of New England, ministers focused on making the youth the central recipients of religious training and thought. As Mather pleaded to divines, "It is with you . . . to lay such Foundations as shall make Posterity either happy or miserable."⁸

Though New England children were "but Novices" and "whatever good they have or do, they are *but newly come to it*," religious authorities still understood them as capable of attaining and understanding Puritan doctrine from an early age.⁹ As John Cotton's treatise shows, ministers recognized the latent potential in children to gain the knowledge required to achieve grace.¹⁰ Other divines echoed the sentiment, following in Cotton's footsteps. One tract, "The A, B, C of Religion," repeatedly asserts that the lesson of religious values "is not above" children. Indeed, the author contended, "our *Children* soon after they have been done hanging on the *Breast*; May be taught, *That* their *Conversion* to God is necessary." Children could also be taught, even as "*Infants* . . . *That* there are *Evil Practices*, which will prove Dangerous to them"

⁸ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 68-69.

⁹ [Cotton Mather], *Addresses*, 76.

¹⁰ Cotton, *Spiritual Milk*. For a masterful work of intellectual history and an influential discussion of Puritan theology, and the significance of grace to seventeenth-century Puritans, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1939).

and “*How the Great God is to be Feared.*”¹¹ Because children were so important to the religious health of New England, ministers quickly and explicitly pointed out their educational capacity, so as to begin their religious training from an early age.

The unique capability of children to attain religious knowledge often led to a reformulation of intellectual hierarchies, as ministers conceived of children as more “Gracious”—and more capable—than their adult counterparts. Cotton Mather, borrowing an idea from James Janeway, a prominent writer for children in the old country, penned “A Token, for the CHILDREN of NEW-ENGLAND,” in which he recounted the stories of godly children. One story concerns John Clap and his untimely death at the age of thirteen. Clap was profoundly gracious from a young age, so much so that even “The best *Christians* in the place professed themselves, made ashamed by the Fervency of this *Young Disciple.*”¹² Other children had a similar effect on their neighbors. One “very little Child whose prayers were so frequent and so fervent” brought shame to his “Neighbour,” who, upon learning of the devoted child, shouted, “*The prayers of that Child will sink me to the bottom of Hell.*” This child, and others like him, could “condemn the *prayerless* lives of all the Neighbourhood,” and ministers saw great potential in them.¹³

¹¹ [Cotton Mather], *The A, B, C, of Religion. Lessons Relating to the Fear Of God, Fitted unto the Youngest & Lowest Capacities. And Children Suitably instructed in the Maxims of Religion. I Joh. ii. 13. I Write unto you, Little Children.* (Boston, 1713), 5-9, 18-19.

¹² [Cotton Mather], *A Token, for the Children of New-England. Or, Some Examples of Children, In whom the fear of God was Remarkably Budding, before they Dyed. In Several Parts of New-England. Preserved and Published, for the Encouragement of Piety in other Children. And, Added as Supplement, unto the Excellent Janeways Token for Children Upon the Re-printing of it, in this Countrey.* (Boston, 1700), 8.

¹³ [Cotton Mather], *Addresses*, 104.

Though children could condemn and damn, religious authorities also held them in higher esteem than adults for their potential to uplift the community. Some children were “eminently blessed by the Lord,” such that “whole Nations have fared the better for them: Rivers of Water have flowed out of their Souls, whereby thousands have been refreshed.”¹⁴ Whether damning, condemning, or uplifting, religious authorities formulated children as uniquely capable of achieving true grace, and therefore privileged them over adults.

The capability and preeminence of children did not, however, lead to a gentle, guiding hand from ministers. When interacting with children, ministers often appealed to their fear of death, which surrounded them in the harsh New England wilderness.¹⁵ Not all children were as godly as John Clap, and, in their efforts to make them so, ministers warned of their potential untimely end. In sermons, ministers often spoke directly to the children in the audience, reminding them “As *Young* as you are, ‘tis not *too Soon* for you to *Dy*; ‘tis not *too Soon* for you to fall into a *Damnation that Slumbers not*.”¹⁶ Intense moments often colored ministers’ efforts to inculcate Puritan values in New England youth, because of the importance of children to religious survival in the wilderness. Furthermore, due to the tenuous nature of life, especially among children, religious authority sought rapid conversion. After all, as Increase Mather pleaded with children, “If you dy and be not first new Creatures, better you had never been

¹⁴ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation, Or A Sermon Wherein Godly Parents are Encouraged, to Pray and Believe for their Children, Preached the third day of the fifth Month, 1678. which Day was set apart by the second Church in Boston in New-England, humbly to seek unto God by Fasting and Prayer, for a Spirit of Converting Grace, to be poured out upon the Children and Rising Generation in New-England.* (Boston, 1678), 17.

¹⁵ On the culture of death in Puritan New England, see David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁶ [Cotton Mather], *A, B, C, of Religion*, 33-34.

born.”¹⁷ Death was often used as a tool of conversion by religious authorities because of the fear it produced among New England children.

Because children were recognized as crucial to the survival of New England, ministers often made direct appeals to them, engaging with the youth through sermons and catechisms. Puritan ministers published tracts for children quite often throughout the seventeenth century. Though many treatises found in New England were brought from England in the early settlement years, New Englanders increasingly published their own catechisms which they saw as “so necessary & fruitfull an exercise.”¹⁸ The consensus in New England, that “The *best Preacher* is he, that Preaches what we call, *Childishly*; that so accommodates the Truths of the Gospel, unto his Hearers, that even the *Little Children* may *mind* them,” dictated that ministers had a responsibility to engage all members of the audience, and placed particular emphasis on reaching children.¹⁹ Though these efforts to directly influence the behavior and thought of children required some flexibility and novel thinking from ministers, interaction between religious authorities and children was indispensable to “teaching the knowledg of God” and shaping children “rich in Grace.”²⁰

In an effort to inculcate Puritan values more thoroughly, religious authorities wrote and advised frequently on the responsibilities present in the relationship between parents and

¹⁷ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 22.

¹⁸ John Fisk[e], *The Watering of the Olive Plant In Christs Garden. Or A Short Catechism For the first Entrance of our Chelmesford Children: Enlarged by A three-fold Appendix*. (Cambridge, 1657), A2, preface 1.

¹⁹ [Cotton Mather], *A, B, C, of Religion*, 4.

²⁰ Thomas Shepard, *A Short Catechism Familiarly Teaching the Knowledg of God, and of our Selves. First Composed, and improved, for the private instruction of the younger sort in Cambridg in New-England*. (Cambridge, 1654), Title Page; Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 22.

children. Parents were “*encouraged to Pray and believe for their Children*” because it was “marvellous pleasing unto God when his servants pray and believe not only for themselves, but for their Children also.” Setting a proper example for children was paramount to religious authorities, who urged parents to “be careful in [their] Families, to walk so that our Children may see . . . how they ought to walk and to please God.”²¹ Children were tasked with the responsibility to follow the example of their parents, in order to, “out of Duty to *God*, faithfully do [their] Duty to [their] *Parents*.” Fearing children may have been ignorant of this duty, ministers occasionally elaborated and instilled in them such lessons as “*Love your Parents heartily*.”²² Love of God naturally followed from love of parents, as did respect and emulation. Children were encouraged to love their parents and to “*Walk with the Wise*” by following their example, while parents were implored to act “with a perfect heart” and to provide a “*godly*” model for their children.²³

While ministers sought to instill proper responsibilities and functioning into the parent-child relationship, they simultaneously pointed out the many downfalls and shortcomings that they observed between parents and children. To most ministers, there was nothing more devastating than an ungodly child of godly parents. It was a “*terrible Trouble*” to godly parents who “*Live in a continual Agony over those miserable Children*,” and, to ministers, it signaled the corruption of the values they held dearest.²⁴

²¹ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 12, 19.

²² Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 58.

²³ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 58; Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 12, 19.

²⁴ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 2-4.

Parents, however, were not always faultless when a child grew ungodly, and ministers were quick to point out their failures. In Cotton Mather's *Help for Distressed Parents*, the minister condemned as "Lamentable" the father who, even "*Occasionally & Involuntarily, Hurt one of his own Children.*"²⁵ Unlike in England, where the adage "Spare the rod, and spoil the child" informed physical punishment, the rod in New England was a last resort, as it signaled the failure of the patriarch to maintain order without the use of physical force.²⁶ Mather argued that this disciplinary exercise was pointless because children were "*Poisoned*" by their parents at birth and "*Sinning against God, is but the Swelling of the Poison.*"²⁷ In bequeathing original sin to their offspring, parents gained the ultimate responsibility for their proclivity to sin, and thus had no cause to strike their children—it was the fault of the parents that the child had sinned at all.

Cotton Mather's own father, Increase, remained preoccupied with the importance of exemplary behavior of parents for the benefit of their children. A parent who was a poor example was the most "fatally destructive and ruining to the Souls of Children." One child, as Mather relates, "did but one time see his Father in drink," yet this was enough to bring "a fearful curse

²⁵ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 17-18.

²⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, vol. I, *From Tudor Times to the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 20. On the embarrassment that could accompany physical punishment, see Randolph A. Roth, "Spousal Murder in Northern New England, 1776-1865," in *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America*, ed. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, 65-93 (New York: Routledge, 1999); For family violence that went against traditional gender expectations, and Puritan authority's reaction to such cases, see Anne M. Little, "'Shee Would Bump His Mouldy Britch': Authority, Masculinity, and the Harried Husbands of New Haven Colony, 1638-1670," in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, ed. Michael A. Bellesiles, 42-66 (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

²⁷ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 17-18.

upon him, and upon his Posterity to this day.”²⁸ Not only had the exposure to sin darkened the child’s future, but its impacts were felt through generations of the New England family.

Puritan ministers concerned themselves above all else with advancing their faith in the New World. In recognizing children as central to this cause, ministers sought to engage both with them and their parents on a variety of topics. Religious authorities intervened in family life because children could spell success or doom for the entire Puritan mission. The fears of religious authorities were not without precedent, and each minister likely recalled the biblical story of the Israelites and Canaan relayed in *Judges*. That story, according to Increase Mather, “maketh it very manifest that, that most corrupt Generation, were the grand-Children of those, that were first embodied as a peculiar People . . . the *third Generation* among that People proved degenerate and apostate.”²⁹ Indeed, children who failed to uphold the Puritan faith would descend into the “Lowermost parts of the *Hell*,” along with the rest of the New England commonwealth.³⁰ No fate would rival the dreadful apostasy, and Puritan ministers worked to mitigate the threat by engaging with parents and children of rising generations from the early years of settlement.

²⁸ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 20.

²⁹ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 60.

³⁰ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 53.

Chapter Four

“My son, Henry, my son Henry, ah poor child!” ‘Common Folk,’ Parental Authority, and Children in Seventeenth-Century New England

Early in 1673, Samuel Danforth, the Reverend of the First Church of Roxbury, recorded the return of two New Englanders from Indian captivity in his records. “Tidings,” he wrote, “concerning the redemption of mr Foster of Charlstown fro captivity after neer 18 moneth slavery and his return to London, his sonn william coming home to his mother at Charlestown, having been his father companion in bondage.”¹ The return of this New England father and son must have brought great relief to the rest of the community—not all who were taken into the frightful wilderness survived. Upon his return, Foster departed the colony for London, which suggests that he wished for a reprieve from the fragility of his New England life. His son, however, returned to his mother, as Danforth was quick to record. The boy was clearly quite important to his mother and his eighteen-month absence necessitated his return to their family home. The father, having spent time in captivity with his son, returned to London, while the boy returned to his undoubtedly terrified mother.

The peculiar nature of New England in the seventeenth century dictated a reconsideration of childhood within the household, its role in the family, and the relationship between parents and children. Bonds between them grew stronger and more affectionate as the years passed in the

¹ Samuel Danforth, “Rev. Samuel Danforth’s Records of the First Church in Roxbury,” in *New-England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 34 (Boston: New-England Historic, Genalogical Society, 1880), 361.

New England wilderness. The relationships between parents and children, as Helena M. Wall points out, did not lack in complexity, as “the tight connection between love and fear, affection and discipline, submission and authority form a distinctive, particular understanding of parental love.”² Families balanced these competing forces in a variety of ways, yet certain consistencies emerge in the historical record. The fragility of life in New England, coupled with the draining anxiety of being in a community on the frontier of the wilderness, as well as the subsistence economy that demanded labor from children, all converged, leading parents to a new conception of children as more important within the family, and therefore due certain amounts of affection and love, tempered with training and rigor.

New Englanders may not have been the first to recognize the family as a determinant of societal outcomes, but, as the surviving documentation on religious authority suggests, they did recognize this connection. The New England “family was a dynamic, creative shaper of society, not an inert building block or a passive reflection of it.”³ Thus, both secular and religious authorities in New England sought to extend their own influence into the family, precisely while parents themselves were arriving at new understandings of childhood and its role in the family and the commonwealth at large. Within families, kinship networks began to take precedent over external matters relating to the colony, as parents sought to ensure a degree of stability for their families beyond the contemporary world. Cultivating a world in which one’s children and their offspring could experience a degree of continuity and stability became a primary concern of parents and the ‘common folk’ in New England. Parents began to construct these new

² Helena M. Wall, “Notes on Life since *A Little Commonwealth*: Family and Gender History since 1970,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (October 2000): 816.

³ Wall, “Notes on Life,” 813. See also John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

understandings almost as soon as their ships had successfully crossed the Atlantic and landed in the Massachusetts Bay.

Once the first wave of eager English settlers landed and stepped onto the welcoming shores of New England, they quickly set about establishing shelter both physically and metaphorically. They constructed New England as a welcoming, healthful environment—a good place to raise children and nurture a family. Francis Higginson wrote in a letter to “His Friends in England,” that even the Atlantic passage had been “healthful” and it was much better than voyages to other distant lands. Though two children, one his own, had died on the Atlantic, he pointed out that “they were both very sickly children and not likely to have lived long if they had not gone to sea.”⁴ Other writers sent letters with similar sentiments. Thomas Welde wrote to his former parishioners in England of “women big with child” that crossed the Atlantic, and could happily report that “one delivered of a lusty child within forty hours after she landed, she and the child well, and so continue to this day.”⁵ Though some of these writings were meant to recruit the English to New England, they also reveal how the earliest settlers constructed their new home as a healthful place for adults and children alike.

In writing home to their English brethren across the Atlantic, some New Englanders began to compare their new and old homes directly, asserting that New England was a better environment for children and families than old England. Some sickly children “coming to land recovered in a short time,” because, as Higginson pointed out, a “sup of New-England’s air is

⁴ Francis Higginson to his Friends in England, July 24, 1629, in Everett Emerson, ed., *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638*, Commonwealth Series, ed. Winfred E. A. Bernhard, vol. 2 (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 23.

⁵ Thomas Welde to his Former Parishioners at Tarling, June/July 1632, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 95.

better than a whole draft of old England's ale."⁶ John Winthrop, the preeminent Massachusetts Bay governor, wrote to his friend John White, an English minister who was instrumental in attaining the charter for New England, about his difficulties in convincing John Galloppe to stay in New England because Galloppe's wife refused to cross the Atlantic with her children. Winthrop "marvel[ed] at the woman's weakness" and wondered why "she will live miserably with her children there when she might live comfortably here with her husband."⁷ Not only did Winthrop lament the woman's stubborn refusal to journey from the miserable England to the more beneficial and welcoming environment of New England, but he also revealed the desire of New Englanders to keep families together.

One reason children gained a newfound importance in the New England wilderness was their significance to the family economy. Growing crops and building structures was an activity in which children played a large part. It seems likely that one worry held by English families that were considering relocating to New England was that their children would be a burden on the family's subsistence. Francis Higginson sought to mitigate these concerns in his letter to England, writing "Little children of five years old may by setting corn one month be able to get their own maintenance abundantly."⁸ John Hull, a New England merchant whose father brought him to the Massachusetts Bay as a child, recalled in his diary, "I was taken from school to help

⁶ Francis Higginson to His Friends in England, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 23; The Rev. Francis Higginson to His Friends at Leicester, September 1629, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 35.

⁷ John Winthrop to Rev. John White, July 4, 1632, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 99.

⁸ The Rev. Francis Higginson to His Friends at Leicester, July 1629, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 25.

my father plant corn.”⁹ Children joined their parents in the fields and helped acquire the necessary resources for the family’s subsistence. Thus they quickly became and remained important, even invaluable, members of New England families.

Because of the importance of children to New England families, illnesses could be particularly frightening to parents. Peter Thacher prayed often for the health of his family and recorded matters small and large. One November day in 1679 he wrote, “ys day ye Child was much troubled by fitts of houping for want of breath. ys day my spirits were very low.”¹⁰ That his child was sick and uncomfortable impacted Thacher emotionally. His wife was equally saddened and worried when the children fell sick. Thacher reported later in 1679 that “Lidea [his wife] was very Mallancholly.” The two parents brought the child into “bed to us” but Thacher “judge[d Lidea] went not to bed all night.”¹¹ These parents had a great deal of affection for their children, and worried much over their health and how best to maintain it.

In addition to illness, which garnered much comment in personal diaries throughout New England, various Puritans recorded accidents or acts of God that resulted in injuries to children. Samuel Danforth recorded one such incident, “dreadful thunder [&] lightning” that struck in July of 1665. “A stream of fire” struck Benjamin Gilham’s house which “wounded & hurt his daughter” and “stupifyed ye rest that were in ye house.” The same storm also sent a bolt of lightning into Richard Davenport’s home where it nearly killed his son. The bolt “stroke ye dog

⁹ John Hull, *Diaries of John Hull, Mint-Master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay*, in *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 3 ([Worcester, MA], 1857), 142.

¹⁰ Peter Thacher, “The Journal of Peter Thacher of Milton, 1678-9 to 1681-2,” reel 9, vol. 9.17-9.19, *Pre-Revolutionary Diaries Microfilm*, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 18. “Y” was often used as a short hand for “Th,” “Thi,” and “Tha,” so “Ys,” for example, should be understood as “This.” Note: The page numbers referenced refer to the transcript of the diary in the microfilm, and not to the page in the actual diary.

¹¹ Thacher, “Journal,” 97.

& killed Him, but ye boy through mercy had no hurt.”¹² In recording the storm, Danforth drew particular attention to the children that were hurt or spared in the blasts. When recording accidents and close encounters with death, New England diarists and record-keepers often recorded for posterity the children involved because they were of particular interest and importance to all Puritans.

Children did not always escape illness and danger as unscathed as Davenport’s son, or with their lives as intact as Gilham’s daughter. New England parents sadly recorded many instances of their children dying and the emotional toll it took on them. As early as 1630, John Winthrop bemoaned the loss of his son, Henry, who had accompanied him across the Atlantic. John Winthrop wrote of the death in a letter to his wife, “the Lord’s hand hath been heavy upon myself in some very near to me: my son, Henry, my son Henry, ah poor child!” Henry had left his pregnant wife in England when he departed for New England, and this increased Winthrop’s anguish: “Yet it grieves me much more for my dear daughter [Elizabeth]. The Lord strengthen and comfort her heart to bear this cross patiently.” John Winthrop was devastated by the death of his son and worried most for the health of his family in England as a result. Elizabeth crossed the Atlantic to New England in 1631, and John Winthrop took her and the child into his care.¹³ Though his son was grown, Henry’s death saddened John Winthrop and necessitated his intervention to maintain the health of Henry’s surviving family, which he gladly made as an affectionate Puritan parent.

¹² Danforth, “Records,” 163.

¹³ John Winthrop to Margaret Winthrop, July 16, 1630, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 44-45; Lawrence Shaw Mayo, *The Winthrop Family in America* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1948), 61. On Henry’s death, see also *ibid.*, 51. One day after arriving in Massachusetts, Henry had gone out with a party to explore the land. The men saw an Indian canoe across the river that they wished to examine. Henry was the only one who could swim, so he volunteered. While crossing, he was overcome “with cramps and went down,” drowning in the river.

In addition to commenting on the tragic deaths of children, New Englanders also recorded and lamented the deaths of other family members, whose deaths affected the lives of children. Simon Bradstreet, a resident of New London, recorded in May of 1674 the passing of Jonathan Parker's wife, who died "within an hour or two after shee was delivered." Parker and his wife had "many small children" and Bradstreet noted that this "added to her husbands Losse."¹⁴ Though the death of Parker's wife was significant enough to note, the fact that she was involved in rearing her children increased the anxiety and the tragedy surrounding the motherless children. Other New England writers mentioned similar deaths in letters to England. Thomas Dudley wrote of Mrs. Skelton, the wife of Salem's minister, who "put herself into most violent fit of the wind colic and vomiting . . . fell into a fever and so died." Dudley added that she was "the main pillar of her family, having left behind her an husband and four children, weak and helpless, who can scarce tell how to live without her." Mrs. Skelton "well deserve[d] to be honorably remembered" for her role in responsibly parenting children and, as such, her death had far-reaching, future consequences in the eyes of New Englanders.¹⁵

The deaths of adult family members were significant to Puritans in New England not least because the deceased could no longer protect their families—and specifically their children—from harm. The protection of vulnerable children was a primary responsibility in New England and parents made efforts to keep their children safe even from accidents and acts of God. Samuel Danforth mentioned "dreadfull thunder crackes" in Marshfield and recorded that "Goodwife Phileps" demanded that her son "shut ye door," as she had evidently survived a close

¹⁴ Simon Bradstreet, "Bradstreet's Journal," in *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 8 (Boston: New England Historic-Genealogical Society, 1854), 329.

¹⁵ Thomas Dudley to the Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln, March 12 and 28, 1630/1, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 82.

encounter with lightning only four years earlier. Despite the woman's attempt to protect her family, the storm sent a "Ball of Fire fro heaven, down ye chimney," which claimed the lives of four Puritans and a dog. By reason of the Goodwife's intervention, as Danforth pointed out, "a little child" and "a woman wth child being present" were saved from death.¹⁶ Families in New England tasked themselves with the protection of their children and they acted on this responsibility frequently.

A striking and perhaps unexpected feature of the New England family in the seventeenth century was the love and affection that existed in the bonds between parents and children, even among the harshest of Puritan theologians. In the preamble to Michael Wigglesworth's Journal, transcribed and published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, the author suggested that Wigglesworth "calls to mind those stern figures in steeple-crowned hats who represent Puritanism in popular cartoons."¹⁷ Wigglesworth was indeed, as his notes reveal, a harsh and rigorous Puritan who held himself to an extremely high standard and bemoaned his own shortcomings. From his journal's gloomy pages, however, also emerges a man who felt a strong affective connection with his parents, despite his efforts to devote himself solely to God. His thoughts often drifted to his parents, even during "private meeting[s]," and he prayed often for "love and dutifulness to [his] parents." When his father died in the fall of 1653, Wigglesworth was dispirited and pled with God, "my humble supplication is to the Lord to sanctify his hand to me and all of us whom it concerns and to become a father of the fatherless."¹⁸ Though his thoughts were subdued, as was characteristic of many devoted Puritans, his father's death

¹⁶ Danforth, "Records," 165.

¹⁷ Michael Wigglesworth, "The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth," in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 35, *Transactions, 1942-1946* (Boston: The Society, 1951), 312.

¹⁸ Wigglesworth, "Diary," 369.

implanted in him fear, sadness, and uncertainty. His appeal was for personal relief, but he also recognized the universality of his emotional state and petitioned God for the betterment of all who shared in his suffering.

Other New Englanders left more powerful and developed records of their parents' deaths. In 1667, Samuel Danforth composed an unusual entry in his typically terse public records book. With a flurry of superlatives, he recorded the sad passing of his "honoured Father, mr John Wilson, Pastour to ye church of Boston."¹⁹ Abandoning the conventions of his records, he wrote of "a man eminent in Faith, love, humility, self-denyal, prayer, soudnes of minde, zeal for God, liberality to all men." According to the record, the pastor was "beloved & lamented of all," and his death had a significant impact on Danforth.²⁰ Just a year earlier, John Hull had similarly recorded the death of his father, Robert, in the summer of 1666. Hull praised his father, who was very ill for two days and then "taken . . . with violent cramp in his legs and burning at his heart," for his fortitude in the face of immense suffering. The elder Hull, according to his son, "bore all with sweet patience and thankfulness." John was "loath to part" with his father and noted the outpouring of support he received, writing "Our private meeting kept at our house a day of humiliation to show their sympathy with me." John Hull had a great deal of affection for his father, having accompanied him across the Atlantic to New England, and he was suddenly

¹⁹ Though not his father by birth, Samuel Danforth married John Wilson's daughter, Mary, and fathered twelve children. When Danforth was thirteen, his biological father passed away, only a few years after they had arrived in New England. The late pastor was likely an important parental figure to Danforth. On the Danforth genealogy and Samuel's father-in-law, John Wilson, see John Joseph May, *Danforth Genealogy. Nicholas Danforth Of Framlingham, England, and Cambridge, N. E. (1589-1638) And William Danforth Of Newbury, Mass. (1640-1721) And Their Descendants*. (Boston: Published by Charles H. Pope, 1902), esp. 25. For "honoured Father," see Danforth, "Records," 297.

²⁰ Danforth, "Records," 297.

thrown adrift once more by his father's death. He could only find relief in the future, "where," he wrote, "I have, through grace, good hope to be again with him (in God's time) for ever."²¹

Because of the importance of children and families to the New England public and the affective bonds that existed between parents and children, marriage and procreation could become a primary goal, even a means to provide direction to a life. Wigglesworth noted in his journal the "distempers" he experienced over his station in life, his accomplishments, and his intended path. In his desire to understand and relieve these feelings, he met with a man named Mr. Alcock, who had experience in such "distempers." Alcock recommended that he should marry and start a family, referencing, as Wigglesworth noted, "An example of one just affected like my self before his marriage, who was grievously perplexed with it, yet went on with it and did very wel after, and hath divers children living at this day." Furthermore, "divers others" had "taken this cours with good success." Wigglesworth followed the advice of Alcock, and was married in the spring of 1655. His wife gave birth to a number of children in the ensuing years, all of which received Wigglesworth's best hopes for a healthful future and were the focus of many fervent prayers.²² In his new purpose as a husband and a father, Wigglesworth found his prior "distempers" much relieved and felt his life had a new and more meaningful direction.

John Pond illuminated the differences that rapidly appeared between New and Old England in his letter to his father, explaining, "my writing unto you is to let you understand what a country this new Eingland is where we live."²³ John Pond, in attempting to describe the vastly different "new Eingland" to his father, presented himself with a tremendous challenge. The changes that occurred in the early years of New England's settlement were rapid and

²¹ Hull, *Diaries*, 156.

²² Wigglesworth, "Diary," 405-406, 416.

²³ John Pond to William Pond, March 15, 1630/1, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 64-66.

uncontained. Adults came to characterize anew the role of children in their families and to reconsider the role in New England society of children, who represented the best hopes for the future religious and physical wellbeing of the colony. The nature of life in New England required economic contributions from children, which increased their value, but parents also increasingly appreciated, loved, and worried for their children on a more personal level. Even while secular and religious authorities sought to reach into families to assert their power and ensure their best interests, parents themselves came to view children more affectionately and sought to ensure a degree of stability into the lives of their offspring. Parents reconstructed children as central to their own families and acted on this understanding in ways that would best ensure the survival of their own unique hopes for the future. These hopes did not always mesh in productive ways with the interests of secular authorities, and they rarely aligned with the fiery rhetoric of Puritan ministers.

Chapter Five

“Miserably both *neglected and indulged*” Children, Childhood, and the Emergence of Local Tension in Seventeenth-Century New England

The new construction of childhood and children at the center of the New England world inevitably gave rise to tensions, especially when authorities sensed the Puritan errand going astray. Cotton Mather declared to a group of children that “The *Godliness* of your *Parents*, will not Save you, from the *Everlasting Destruction*.” These youthful New Englanders had apparently fallen into the trap of believing that the prayers of their parents would deliver them. Mather assured them otherwise: “When you come to Ly and Broil in that horrible *Fire* of the Wrath of God, all the *Godliness* of your *Parents*, will be but *Oyl* unto the Flame, in the Lowermost parts of the *Hell* reserved for you.” Indeed, the failure of children who were given the advantage of godly parents was an untenable situation for Mather. “Better,” he told the children, “thy *Father* had been an *Indian* or a *Negroe*.”¹

By failing to fulfill the expectations placed on them by religious authorities, families and children were the audience to increasingly desperate and harsh rhetoric. From an early period, both religious and secular authorities recognized children as the “doore” through which “all

¹ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents. Or, Counsels & Comforts For Godly Parents Afflicted with Ungodly Children; And Warnings unto Children to Beware of all those Evil Courses, Which would be Afflictive unto their Parents*. (Boston, 1695), 53. For a similar example, see [Cotton Mather], *Cares about the Nurseries . . .* (Boston, 1702).

sortes of abominations” could enter New England society.² Parents recognized this as well, but they gradually came to place their hopes for their family’s future in the Massachusetts Bay on their children. Parents desired, above all, to achieve and maintain a degree of stability and success within their kinship networks and across generations. The tensions that emerged because of these different goals for children came to characterize the social life of New England. Though they manifested at a local level, these tensions were created by and disseminated from the contested ground upon which New England’s novel conceptions of childhood and children stood.

Since secular authorities, religious authorities, and parents agreed that childhood had obtained a new religious, material, and social centrality to the colony, Puritans began to hold one another accountable to uphold that belief within the home. Puritans had much experience in monitoring the community, as they policed one another’s sexual, economic, and social behavior from the early years of settlement. As it did in these other realms, policing the treatment, understanding, and raising of children led to profound divisions within Puritan society. The colony was founded on a covenant between God and man, as well as a covenant between New Englanders, and Puritans had no qualms about intervening in one another’s lives to uphold this social structure. As notions of children being absolutely critical to New England emerged and gained acceptance, they were gradually folded into the covenant idea and Puritans came to hold each other accountable to an increasing extent.

While secular authorities concerned themselves with protecting future citizens of the commonwealth and religious authorities toiled to ensure the survival of their religious way, parents sought to ensure a degree of stability into their kinship networks both within and beyond the contemporary world. Thus, while external authorities viewed children as the bedrock of the

² LXIX. [Court Files, Suffolk, No.744[a], 1st Paper], in *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1901-1928), vol. 2, 174-177.

commonwealth, many parents saw their offspring primarily as the bedrock of the family. What appeared to be a shared conception of children, gradually emerged as an incompatibility that advanced local tension both between authorities and the ‘common folk,’ and between individuals who responded differently to the messages of Puritan secular and religious authorities.

While children were often formulated as crucial to the survival and advancement of the Massachusetts Bay, religious authorities also understood them as inherently threatening to the entire commonwealth and even the Christian world, and this, in part, is responsible for the emphasis placed on children in religious discourse. Ministers rarely felt assured that children would fulfill their proper roles, so anxious writers often bemoaned the rising generation, fearing the worst. Of all the issues facing New Englanders in the wilderness, none was “more ghastly, than the ignorance, the wildness, the lewdness found in so great a part of the *Rising Generation*.”³ One minister saw the devolution of the rising generation as a sign that “the *English* are become like unto the *Indians*,” while another blamed “ungodly Tutors” for the decline in doctrinal inculcation.⁴ Increase Mather also noted the “consumption on Religion all the world over . . . the buryals of Christians are frequent and their birth is rare.”⁵ New England, from the Puritan point of view, was the bastion of proper religiosity, the “Citty upon a Hill” with

³ [Cotton Mather], *Addresses To Old Men, and Young Men, and Little Children. In Three Discourses I. The Old Mans Honour; or, The Hoary Head found in the way of Righteousness. A Discourse Recommending unto Old Men, A Saving Acquaintance with the Lord Jesus Christ. II. The Young Man’s Glory; or Wreath of Graces for the Head of Youth. A Discourse Recommending unto Young Men, A blessed Victory over the Devil. III. The Little Childs Lesson; Or, A Child wise unto Salvation. A Discourse instructing and inviting Little Children to the Exercises of Early Piety. To which may be added, A short Scriptural Catechism, accommodated unto their Capacities.* (Boston, 1690), 90. For more worries about the “Rising Generation in New-England,” see Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven To the Present and Succeeding Generations Or A Discourse Wherein is shewed, I. That the Children of Godly Parents are under special Advantages and Encouragements to seek the Lord. II The exceeding danger of Apostasie, especially as to those that are the Children and Posterity of such as have been eminent for God in their Generation. III. That Young Men ought to Remember God their Creator.* (Boston, 1679), esp. A3.

⁴ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 91; [Cotton Mather], *Addresses*, 90.

⁵ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 65.

“The eyes of all people” observing. As such, the rising generation struck fear into the hearts of religious authorities for “If Apostasy prevail amongst such a People it is like to be a sad Apostasy indeed.”⁶ Religious authorities sought to bolster their own role and responsibility to the children of New England in response to the threats they believed young people increasingly posed to New England and the Christian world at large.

The Puritan expectation that parents be responsible for some of the upbringing and religious training, an assumption that was initially unquestioned, came to be increasingly challenged as New England authorities began to recognize emergent disagreements over the roles of children. Viewed as “too important a matter to be left to weekly lessons” at church, religious training by parents initially formed the backbone of New England society. But religious authorities eventually realized the failure of parents, lamenting their shortcomings.⁷ “*Look to your Families,*” urged Israel Mather in 1679, for they were “the Nurceries for Church and Common-wealth, ruine Families, and ruine all.” Condemning these “Nurceries,” he wrote, “the great wound and misery of *New-England* is that Families are out of Order . . . Family Government is lost, & gone.” The minister demanded improved parenting to “prevent Apostasy” and he sought to make New England parents aware of their shortcomings by informing them that “ignorance is the mother . . . of Heresy.”⁸ Despite his moaning, Mather remained steadfastly committed to the old Puritan value of family education. He wished less to replace completely the

⁶ Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (Boston, 1838), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>; Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 67.

⁷ Failure within the ranks of parents had far-reaching consequences in Puritan New England. According to Edmund Morgan, “If the family failed to teach its members properly, neither the state nor the church could be expected to accomplish much.” Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 139. On the connection between the family and society’s future, see *ibid.*, 143.

⁸ Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven*, 91-92.

responsibility of parents with himself and his fellow ministers than for a renewed spirit of evangelism within the family.

Other ministers, not as keen on the continuation of parental roles in the raising of children, focused on extending their own authority into the family to indoctrinate children. The fifth commandment, “Honour thy father and thy mother,” often became a focal point of ministers’ efforts to expand their child-rearing role.⁹ Ministers noted the “RUINE OF THIS LAND” and located the cause in “THIS VERY SIN OF DISOBEDIENCE TO THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT.”¹⁰ Not only did children fail their parents in breaking the fifth commandment, but they also broke the sixth, “Thou shalt not kill,” “becoming the worst sort of *Murthers*” by making their parents “*Weary of their Lives*” and driving them to an early death.¹¹ As a result, ministers increasingly sought to reconstruct the meaning of the commandment so they could circumvent parents.¹² In 1656, John Cotton presented the fifth commandment in its original form first before elaborating on “*Who are here meant by Father and Mother.*” It was not the child’s parents, but instead, in Cotton’s reading of the commandment, it was “All our Superiours whether in Family, School, Church, and common wealth.”¹³ By presenting such an

⁹ Exodus 20:12 (AKJV).

¹⁰ Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, Appendix 4-5.

¹¹ Exodus 20:13 (AKJV); Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 46.

¹² The appalling lack of respect for the fifth commandment was immensely startling and frustrating to Puritan ministers. They had difficulty understanding how such failures were possible: “One would think there should scarce be any Need of teaching them. There is no *Mystery* in this Matter; Tis no Sublime abstruse Notion.” See Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, Appendix 4-5.

¹³ John Cotton, *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes. In either England: Drawn out of the breasts of both Testaments for their Souls nourishment. But may be of like use to any Children.* (Cambridge, 1656), 4. For another minister who elaborated on the fifth commandment, explaining that it meant “we walk orderly in our callings, inwardly acknowledging, and outwardly according to Rule, expressing that honour which is due to Superiours, Inferiours, Equals, according to their several relations,” see John Norton, *A Brief Catechisme Containing The Doctrine of Godlines, Or Of Living Unto God.* (Cambridge, 1660), 20-

interpretation of the fifth commandment that extended its meaning well beyond an individual's parents, Puritan ministers could assert and increase their own role in the proper upbringing of children, which they saw as unfulfilled by parents.

In the face of the increasing role of secular and religious authorities within the family, some parents pushed back in an attempt to reinforce their own autonomy within their families. Even some ministers, in their private lives, took part, occasionally forsaking obligations to the congregation in order to fulfill familial duties. In 1679, Peter Thacher, a minister, abandoned his public and religious obligation to preach in Salem, because of illness in his family. As he recalled it, "my wife was ill, Child ill before & my selfe disordered." He reported these maladies to his superior, "whereupon hee dismissed me from my obligation to preach."¹⁴ Despite Thacher's obligation to the New England public in Salem, he remained at home to look after his family, which took precedence over his religious responsibilities.

Stories of parents intervening to protect the best interests, health, and physical safety of their children abound in Puritan New England, and they are indicative of both increased familial responsibilities to children as well as strengthening bonds and loyalties between family members.¹⁵ As these tightly knit bonds developed, Puritans increasingly sided with their families on all matters, even going so far as attempting to alter trials by deceiving the courts. In 1665, Hugh Clark was brought "before y[e] church & charged with telling a lye in ye face of ye Court,

21. For James Noyes' view that the fifth commandment demanded "A due respect to the good name or dignity of our Neighbour, in humility, gratitude, and obedience," see James Noyes, *A Short Catechism Composed By Mr. James Noyes Late Teacher of the Church of Christ In Newbury For the use of the Children there*. (Cambridge, 1661), 13-14.

¹⁴ Peter Thacher, "The Journal of Peter Thacher of Milton, 1678-9 to 1681-2," reel 9, vol. 9.17-9.19, Pre-Revolutionary Diaries Microfilm, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 20.

¹⁵ The development of these tighter kinship and familial bonds closely parallels Edmund Morgan's argument that tribalism came to characterize New England social life. See Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 161-186.

slandering Authority.” The lie Clark told was in defense of his son-in-law who had been charged with murder “which was proved.” According to Danforth’s Records, Clark deceived the court in order to “get some satisfaction & recompence for ye wrong yt was done to his son in law.”¹⁶ Hugh Clark’s interests lay in protecting the best interests of his family—especially his daughter, who stood to suffer much from her husband’s conviction. Clark’s actions reveal the intense loyalty that became intrinsic to families in New England, while simultaneously revealing the ways in which these bonds could contest and challenge religious and secular authorities.

The Halfway Covenant of 1662 was a flashpoint of the tensions that developed between religious authorities, secular authorities, and New England parents. To combat backsliding and apostasy, the church elected to remove the ban on baptism for children of nonmembers or the unconverted, welcoming them into the church as halfway members in the hopes that they would experience conversion and ultimately become full members.¹⁷ The decision was profoundly controversial in New England as it essentially amounted to a loosening of Puritan doctrine. Religious authorities felt they had no choice but to make a concession because the second and third generations were not as pious or committed to the church as had been their progenitors. The debate over the Halfway Covenant was bitter and it further increased the tensions that had emerged within New England, as religious leaders’ criticism of parents intensified after the decision. “Nothing is more fatally destructive and ruining to the Souls of Children,” a minister preached, “then a bad example in Parents, especially if they be such as pretend to religion.” Another, Cotton Mather, urged the separation of children from “those *Knots* of Profane, Gaming,

¹⁶ Samuel Danforth, “Rev. Samuel Danforth’s Records of the First Church in Roxbury, Mass.,” in *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 34 (Boston: New-England Historic, Genealogical Society, 1880), 164.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the Halfway Covenant, see Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

Scoffing, Drinking, and Unclean Wretches, that keep so many of our Young People in the *Bond of Iniquity* for ever.” A few years earlier, Mather wrote “Our Children are miserably both *neglected* and *indulged*; tho’ *too much* be made of them, in gratifying of their *unruly wills*, nevertheless *too little* is made of them in providing for their *immortal souls*.”¹⁸ Religious authorities lambasted parents for their failure to produce responsible Puritan children.

It seems, however, that parents were not very receptive to the message, as they continued “*too much*” to “gratify” their children. This suggests the persistence of affective bonds between parents and children despite the religious discourse urging them to avoid such bonds on the grounds that they would undermine the inculcation of Puritan doctrine. By 1708, ministers were incorporating appeals to parental affection into their sermons. Forced to accept the persistence of affective familial bonds, Cotton Mather sought to use this parental affection as a means to encourage the indoctrination of the youth. Mather appealed in one sermon to parents by urging them to “Look upon the *Children*, which you have so often let on your *knees*, which always ly so very near to your *Hearts*.” In another, he wrote that parents should think of “*the Child which I have so often had on my Knees, and in my Hands, and at my Table*.” By appealing to their sense of love, admiration, and affection for their children, Mather urged parents to fulfill their proper roles “*Lest that poor Child . . . do fall into Eternal Burnings!*” or “*become a Prey to the Dragons of the Wilderness*.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation, Or A Sermon Wherein Godly Parents are Encouraged, to Pray and Believe for their Children, Preached the third day of the fifth Month, 1678. which Day was set apart by the second Church in Boston in New-England, humbly to seek unto God by Fasting and Prayer, for a Spirit of Converting Grace, to be poured out upon the Children and Rising Generation in New-England*. (Boston, 1678), 20; Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 29; [Cotton Mather], *Addresses*, 90.

¹⁹ [Cotton Mather], *Corderius Americanus. An Essay Upon The Good Education of Children. And what may Hopefully be Attempted, for the Hope of the Flock. In A Funeral Sermon Upon Mr. Ezekiel Cheever. The Ancient and Honourable Master of the Free-School in Boston. Who left off, but when*

In their efforts to ensure the survival of the Puritan mission in the wilderness, religious authorities, who viewed the “first fruits” of conversion among the rising generations of children as an assurance “that all the rest of our Children shall be converted in due time,” cast a wide net to secure the “first fruits.”²⁰ They inserted themselves into the well-ordered family—restructuring it as they went—in order to best serve their theological mission. Secular authorities, as well, extended their authority into the family in an effort to protect the best interests of New England’s future, which were inseparable from the wellbeing of the commonwealth’s children. The reactions of parents, undoubtedly the most amorphous segment of society, were varied. Some listened and sought to reestablish order within their families while maintaining a watchful eye on the community, while others ignored the messages from their religious and secular superiors and pursued other goals, such as the advancement of their individual or of their family. The heated rhetoric and the passion that surrounded New England conceptions of children and childhood produced and shaped tensions within New England society. The community mattered to these seventeenth-century New Englanders—each Puritan man and woman understood the importance of children to the future of that community and acted according to his or her best interests.

Mortality took him off, in August, 1708. the Ninety Fourth Year of his Age With an Elegy and an Epitaph upon him. By one that was once a Scholar to him. (Boston, 1708), 13-14; Cotton Mather, *Help for Distressed Parents*, 4.

²⁰ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 16.

Conclusion

“Being enough to pierce a stony heart” Salem Reconsidered

The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692 was one of the most intense and violent exchanges between New Englanders and it was a profoundly local conflict. The Salem incident casts a long shadow over American history and looms large in the historical consciousness of twenty-first century New Englanders, and Americans alike. Long understood as an intense confrontation between local factions and “a mortal conflict involving the very nature of the community itself,” historians typically attribute the witchcraft scare to the growth of mercantile capitalism or the devolution of theological conformity. But the conflict in Salem, like other local conflicts of the time, could be more fully understood as a development around the decades-old debate over children. In ignoring the role of children, both actively and discursively, in Salem, and New England more broadly, historians have fallen short in providing causal explanations for accusations, convictions, and executions.¹

¹ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 103 (“A mortal conflict...”). For Boyer and Nissenbaum’s argument that psychological displacement paired with economic subjugation and development instigated the Salem incident, see Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*. While Boyer and Nissenbaum look beyond Salem, in that they find an emergent Atlantic market responsible for the witchcraft crisis of 1692, their work is ultimately confined to Salem’s role in that market. They downplay external forces and therefore present a less than convincing causal means for accusations. For an account of the crisis that extends well beyond the confines of Salem to the raging Indian wars on the New England frontier, see Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). Norton does not, however, account for the role of children in the Salem Witchcraft Crisis. For an argument that takes the role of gender more seriously, finding it a causal factor behind witchcraft accusations in Puritan New England, see Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987).

Local conflict did not emerge fully-formed in New England in 1692, nor was it confined to Salem, Massachusetts—it had long been a distinct part of the fabric of New England’s social life by the time witches began to sign “contract[s] with the devil.”² Indeed, this thesis shows how local conflict, an integral aspect of Puritan society in the New World, was introduced and disseminated throughout New England beginning in the first decades of settlement. In colonial New England, conflict ultimately traced back to children—their value, their importance to the future, their proper behavior, their education, and their upbringing. It was the anxieties surrounding children that drove the Salem crisis and also made mercantile capitalism frightful, as it required more extensive networks and thus a diminished role for the community.

Whatever the purported connection of the accused witches in Salem to mercantile capitalists, it may have been overshadowed by their shortcomings in the family in the years leading to the 1692 crisis. Indeed, many of the accused witches had previously been publicly tried and admonished in the 1670s and 1680s for failing to fulfill familial responsibilities.³ Their

² Examination of Sarah Good as Recorded by Ezekiel Cheever, in Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 5.

³ Bridget Bishop, an accused witch, had been brought to court in 1670 for fighting with her husband. Thomas and Bridget Oliver Brought to Court for Fighting (1670), in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 155-156. In 1678, Bridget Bishop was again brought to court. She was tried “for calling her husband opprobrious names, as old rogue and old devil.” The two were sentenced to stand “back to back, on a lecture day in a public market place, both gagged, for about an hour, with a paper fastened to each of their foreheads upon which their offense should be fairly written.” See Bridget Oliver Brought to Court for Using Foul Language Against Her Husband (January 1678), in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 156. The Salem townspeople would have been privy to these crimes because of the public nature of the punishment, and they likely would have harbored suspicions about the Bishops due to these incidents. Another accused witch, Sarah Good, had been brought to court many times over inheritance and debt issues. Her father’s death had also been investigated by “a jury of inquest” which “found him accessory to his own death by drowning himself” in 1672. This would have undoubtedly cast suspicion on his remaining family. For Good’s experiences in court prior to 1692, see Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 139-147. An accused wizard, George Burroughs, a former minister in Salem-Village, was brought to court in 1683 by Salem-Villagers who explained, “without any just reason that we know of, [he] hath withdrawn himself from us, and there hath been no

failure to uphold the most inviolate of their obligations—those to their families and children—may be the reason accusations held particular weight, trials proceeded despite shoddy evidence, and executions were unflinchingly ordered by the Court of Oyer and Terminer.⁴

During the trials, Salem-Villagers spoke of children and families throughout their testimonies, drawing attention to the past shortcomings of accused witches and making their spectral offenses more horrifying to listeners. The apparition of Sarah Good “did most grievously torment” Sarah Bibber, who testified that the specter “did immediately afflict my child by pinching of it, that I could hardly hold it.” Her husband, in an effort to ameliorate the child’s woes, “took hold of the child, but it cried and twisted so dreadfully, by reason of the torture . . . that it got out of its father’s arms, too.” On another night, the apparition of Sarah Good surprised Sarah Bibber at her bedside and “looked upon [Bibber’s] child 4 years old, and presently, upon it, the child was struck into a great fit.”⁵ Other accused witches were charged with similar offenses that involved children. Rebecca Nurse “almost pressed and choked to death” Ann Putnam, who was “wearied out in helping to tend [her] poor afflicted child.” Nurse was also thought to have brutally afflicted and killed the child of John and Hannah Putnam, who “departed this life by a cruel and violent death, being enough to pierce a stony heart, for . . . it

public worship amongst us for four Sabbaths past.” For Burroughs, see Salem Village Versus George Burroughs (1683), in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 172.

⁴ For shoddy evidence and the dubiousness of certain claims by accusers, including a girl who admitted that she accused witches “for sport,” see Testimony of Daniel Eliot, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 95. For more accounts of weak evidence, see Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700), in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, esp. 103-104.

⁵ Testimony of Sarah Bibber, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 12.

was near five hours a-dying.”⁶ The terror associated with these accused witches in Salem is palpable in the surviving record of the events—the perceived attacks on children only functioned to increase the anxiety and panic.⁷

One accused witch, Sarah Good, was doomed from the start because of the amount of evidence presented that painted her as an irresponsible mother and a flawed, even insurgent, wife. When asked “What God do you serve?” Good responded with the doctrinal answer, “The God that made heaven and earth.” The scribe, however, noted that “she was not willing to mention the word God” and “Her answers were in a very wicked, spiteful manner, reflecting and retorting against the authority with base and abusive words.” Her words were interpreted as a direct affront to the hierarchical authority that was designed to control her behavior. Her husband’s interjection did not help matters, as he “said that he was afraid that she either was a witch or would be one very quickly.” He was pressed to elaborate on the reasons for this declaration and was asked “whether he had ever seen anything by her.” He could not confirm that he had, but he answered the query, stating, “it was her bad carriage to him” that led him to believe she was a witch. “I may say with tears,” he testified, “that she is an enemy to all good.”⁸ Despite the controversial nature of much of the evidence presented, the husband’s confirmation

⁶ Testimony of Ann Putnam, Senior, and Ann Putnam, Junior, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 18; Testimony of John and Hannah Putnam, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 27-28.

⁷ For their part, accused witches often sought to use the very same means as their accusers in appeals to their families and responsibilities to their kin, as well as in declaring themselves “as innocent as the child unborn.” See Examination of Rebecca Nurse in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 24; Examination of Bridget Bishop as Recorded by Ezekiel Cheever, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 37.

⁸ Examination of Sarah Good as Recorded by Ezekiel Cheever, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 5-6.

of Sarah Good's reviling of family structures and thus the structures of the commonwealth itself was damning enough.

Many accusers capitalized on the fear and anxiety that surrounded the concerns with witchcraft and family life in Salem. Sarah Good's case was further damaged by the testimony of Johanna Childen, who noted that the "apparition of Sarah Good and her least child did appear." The spectral child "did tell its mother that she did murder it, to which Sarah Good replied that she did it because that she could not attend it."⁹ Good's failure as a mother—her inability to "attend" to her child—would have roused passion among New England authorities that heard the testimony. Similar accusations were levied against the accused wizard and former minister of Salem Village, George Burroughs. Mary Walcott, a seventeen-year-old, reported that Burroughs had "continued torturing and tempting" her for some time. Eventually, as she reported, "he told me he would have killed his first wife and child, when his wife was in travail, but he kept her in the kitchen until he gave her her death wound." Burroughs allegedly swore the girl to secrecy, but his "two first wives in their winding sheets" appeared and "their blood did cry for vengeance against him."¹⁰ The New England conception of children held that they were the inheritors of the colony and any parental behavior that neither acknowledged nor acted upon this would have intensified suspicions and all but assured guilt.

⁹ Testimony of Johanna Childen, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 13. Witches often appeared alongside spectral incarnations of deceased individuals. For Ann Putnam's testimony regarding the appearance of Rebecca Nurse with six ghostly children who accused Nurse of murdering them, see Testimony of Ann Putnam, Senior, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 28-29. For Susannah Sheldon's testimony that Bridget Bishop appeared with "two little children" who told Bishop "to her face that she had murdered them, in setting them in fits whereof they had died," see Testimony of Susannah Sheldon, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 48.

¹⁰ Testimony of Mary Walcott, in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 73. For the death of one of George Burroughs' wives in 1683, see Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 177.

The tensions that exploded in Salem in 1692 had been building since the arrival of English families in New England, as New Englanders swiftly and profoundly departed from English family norms prior to 1630. In casting off their intellectual inheritance, New Englanders reconsidered and reconceptualized children and childhood, ultimately constructing a society in which children were central, indispensable, and vastly more important than they had been in England. In New England, children were associated directly with the future health of the fragile commonwealth. Secular authorities increasingly intervened to protect the wellbeing of New England's rising generations, while religious authorities sought to properly inculcate in children doctrinal Puritan theology. Parents and the common folk were also interested and invested in children, and reconstructed them as valuable members of both the family and the community.

In connecting the future of New England with the children of the colony, secular, religious, and parental authorities constructed and contested differing meanings and goals that each group attached to and associated variously with children. Around this contestation and variation in understandings, tensions emerged that pervaded New England's social life. Secular authorities wished, above all, to ensure that the New England colonies would remain tenable, which required the responsible rearing of Puritan children. Religious authorities concerned themselves primarily with the survival of their congregational system of religion. When necessary, they reached into the family to restore proper deference to God and to enforce Puritan doctrine. Parents, less concerned with such lofty and somewhat abstract goals, and increasingly resistant to the intrusion of these authorities into their families, nonetheless considered children essential because of the affective bonds between parents and children, the economic value of children, and their continued insistence on the parental responsibility to protect and raise

children. They wished to instill stability across their kinship networks and beyond the contemporary world.

Despite the fact that these groups fundamentally agreed on the centrality of children in the society of New England, their different perspectives on what this meant unintentionally introduced local tensions throughout the region. Though these tensions emerged and exploded at the local level, they were created from above and dispersed throughout New England by the discourse concerning children and childhood in which secular authorities, religious authorities, and ‘common folk’ took part. Each group became entrenched in their own views, which ultimately proved incompatible with one another. Tension and conflict, and even the potential for violence, were thus engrained into local communities from the founding days of the Massachusetts Bay. Ironically, it was New Englanders’ recognition of the importance of children to families, communities, and commonwealths, coupled with their responses to this recognition, that set them down a path riddled with turmoil. By constructing a society in which children were of central import, New England ensured its lasting success, while simultaneously engraining contestation and local conflict in the very fabric of its social life.

Given the atmosphere of New England, the accusations of Salem witches made sense, both from the perspective of the accusers and from the perspective of those individuals who listened and accelerated the witchcraft trials to the point of execution. The climate of New England as a whole, the new significance of childhood and children, the tensions that this reconsideration created, and the dissemination of those tensions throughout the many localities in colonial New England combined in Salem and brought about intense division and explosive violence. Paradoxically, the new importance that Puritans found in children and the family and the many consequences of this development, ultimately doomed some members of those very

families to the gallows, and, by Puritan authorities' own reckoning, doomed their children—and the commonwealth—to hell.

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