

The Talk of the Town: Women, Gossip, and Watchfulness in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts

by

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DEDICATION

To my family

Allen, Ann, Erick, Tim, and Sarah

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines women's talk in seventeenth-century Massachusetts through the lens of holy watchfulness, investigating the gendered politics of speech by focusing on gossip—the oral exchange of information that was personal rather than political and concerned affairs of the household and neighborhood rather than the state. It considers when and why women's speech crossed the line from authorized watchfulness to stigmatized gossip and argues that women's lives in early Massachusetts can be better understood by examining their participation in holy watching. Focusing on women's authorized speech and examining the talk of goodwives and servants rather than Antinomians and witches reveals women's words being heard and accepted in public forums. Breaking down distinctions not only between speech and writing but also between sight and sound shows that a material and spatial history of women's lives, work, and speech expands our understanding of how watchfulness operated and of who was actively participating in the transmission of information.

Rather than focusing on illicit speech, this dissertation approaches gossip as a form of information to show that women's talk was instrumental in the formation, adaptation, and maintenance of early New England's religious culture. In a face-to-face culture that prioritized community watchfulness, women's words were vital to the maintenance of order but could easily be viewed as disorderly when deployed in ways considered inappropriate. Authorities tried to rein in threatening aspects of women's speech not just by limiting it but also by putting it in the service of social order, moral policing, and surveillance. Watchfulness harnessed what would

otherwise have been illicit speech in the service of church and state as a way of containing disorder.

This dissertation first surveys the ways that surveillance was embedded in church and state efforts to contain disorder. Puritan ideas combined with older structures to make family government and moral enforcement reliant on ordinary people's observations. It then examines how community surveillance functioned in the daily lives of women in Boston and how gossip helped shape the patriarchal family and household. Focusing on female domestic servants, wives, and neighbors, it shows how official surveillance could be inoperative or ineffective when disorder took place behind closed doors, how women's access to intimate spaces countered hierarchical relationships, and the contradictory messages women received about keeping and revealing men's secrets. It then considers the consequences of gossip for ministers who were accused of sexual indiscretions, showing how political considerations and the historical record have determined whether women's words have been remembered or forgotten. A short epilogue describes the conditions at the turn of the eighteenth century when prominent men formed associations for overseeing the morals of their neighbors and tried to circumvent the role that women had previously held as carriers of information about order and disorder in their communities.

Examining women's gossip allows a reassessment of women's roles in New England puritanism and in Protestantism more broadly. Reconceptualizing women's public roles to include their everyday lives and their conversations restores their significance in early Massachusetts society and the development of American religious practice. Redefining gossip as a form of information not only reveals a range of actors helping shape puritan religious culture

but also underscores the importance of historicizing distinctions between public and private in early America in ways that make women's lives visible.

INTRODUCTION

When Margaret Jones of Charlestown was found guilty of witchcraft in 1648, among the evidence against her was that there were “things she could tell of (as secret speeches) which she had no ordinary means to come to the knowledge of.”¹ Ann Hibbens’s conviction for witchcraft in 1655 included an accusation she was able to overhear a conversation about her between “two of her persecutors, whom she saw talking in the street,” despite not being close enough to hear by natural means.² Other suspected witches were reported to be in two places at once, able to appear and disappear suddenly, or to intrude into bedchambers and other private spaces and therefore able to observe events when they were not present bodily.³ The supernatural ability to observe and overhear gave witches knowledge of events and conversations that they should not have had, and this kind of spectral eavesdropping represented Satan’s attempts to gather information and intrude into people’s lives and conversations.⁴ Information gained by observing and overhearing everyday conversations and activities was a commodity that was being manipulated by the devil and his servants. If women listened when they should

¹ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. James Savage, Richard S. Dunn, and Laetitia Yaendle (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 711–12.

² Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, From the Settlement Thereof in 1628, until Its Incorporation with the Colony of Plymouth, Province of Main, &c. By the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691*, 2nd ed. (London: M. Richardson, 1765), 187–88.

³ For examples see *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts, 1636–1656*, vol. 1 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1911), 325; *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts*, vol. 3 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1913), 413; *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 1667–1671*, vol. 4 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1914), 153–55, 207–9.

⁴ David Thomas Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts: Essex County, 1629–1692* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 179–80.

not or heard what they should not, there could be fatal consequences. Both Jones and Hibbens were hanged.

While witches were made suspicious by their unnatural eavesdropping, victims of sexual assault were doubted if they did not make themselves heard. When twelve-year-old Sarah Lambert accused Peter Croy of assaulting her in a field, his defense included arguments that she did not tell anyone at the time or “speak of it to her dame till the next morning.” She insisted, however, that she had “cried out to her sister that was not far off” and was not heard only because Croy “stopped her breath with his hand on her throat.”⁵ Witnesses who supported Mary Somes’s accusations of assault against her master John Jackson insisted that she “cried out and made a doleful noise” and had immediately run down the stairs to tell other women what had happened.⁶ Testimony in these cases focused on whether the women cried out, whether anyone was around who could have heard, and whether they told anyone about the assault.⁷ For these victims, not talking and not being heard could mean not only that their attackers would go unpunished but that they could themselves be disciplined for not resisting forcefully enough.⁸

Suspected witches who listened inappropriately and assault victims who were expected to make themselves heard represent two of the myriad and sometimes contradictory messages that

⁵ Peter Croy plea and Sarah Lambert examination, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 14, #1254, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives, Boston.

⁶ *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts*, vol. 2 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1912), 238.

⁷ Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chap. 3; Martha L. Finch, *Dissenting Bodies: Corporealities in Early New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 119–20.

⁸ See the case of Dorcas Humphrey in Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: 1642–1649*, vol. 2 (Boston: William White, printer to the Commonwealth, 1853), 13. See also David H. Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England 1630–1776* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1972), 206–7.

women received about their participation in the speech culture of early New England. Women's speaking and listening usually had less acute consequences than execution or assault but in a face-to-face culture that prioritized community watchfulness, women's words were vital to the maintenance of order but could also easily be viewed as disorderly when deployed in ways deemed inappropriate by authorities. When women should speak and when they should remain silent, when they should listen and when they should not, were unresolved questions for those settlers who attempted to instill and cultivate a social and cultural system based on puritan values during the first century of English settlement. New England puritans needed to impose order not only on what they saw as an unruly "wilderness" but also on any unruly behavior on the part of those who occupied the towns they had planted in its stead.⁹ In this "city on a hill," the eyes of the world would be on the puritan experiment, which meant the eyes of neighbors needed to be on each other.

This dissertation examines women's information sharing and gathering in seventeenth-century Massachusetts through the lens of watchfulness. Watchfulness was the foundation of puritan discipline but most studies provide only vague definitions.¹⁰ Generally, watchfulness or "holy watching" was religiously sanctioned community surveillance. It meant being alert for signs of godly behavior or of sin—of order and disorder—in others, in one's self, and in the world. Those who became members of New England's congregational churches signed a

⁹ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 170–72.

¹⁰ The "watchfulness" of puritan communities is, as Jane Kamensky says, "a chestnut of New England history," but its functions and mechanics have not been fully explored. Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Roger Thompson, "'Holy Watchfulness' and Communal Conformism: The Functions of Defamation in Early New England Communities," *New England Quarterly* 56 (1983): 504–22; Edgar J. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process 1620–1692* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 68; George Lee Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts: A Study in Tradition and Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 91.

covenant that included an agreement to watch over and be watched over by fellow saints as a supplement to a regime of self-watch or self-examination.¹¹ Every individual, whether servant or slave, university-educated minister or magistrate's wife, was subject to observation and evaluation by those who lived, labored, and worshiped nearby. Watchfulness was not simple nosiness; it was meant to be a pious activity and part of the daily life of a devout puritan.¹² Watchfulness did not mean passive observation. It included an obligation to intervene and correct, if possible, and this could mean approaching the sinner directly or reporting the behavior to a church elder, minister, or magistrate. In practice, observers often did nothing. Avoiding conflict was sometimes preferable to confronting a neighbor, at least unless or until the issue was forced by concerns for safety or when compelled by authority.¹³ My concern in this study is with the informal mechanisms of watchfulness, not only when people approached a disorderly person but also the effects of living with the threat or fear of being watched, and how civic and ecclesiastical institutions created the conditions in which informal watching was encouraged.

This dissertation considers four interlocking issues. First, I consider when or why women's speech was considered to have crossed the line from authorized watchfulness to stigmatized gossip. Second, I argue that our understanding of women's lives in early New England changes if we take seriously puritans' admonitions to watchfulness and consider the full

¹¹ On self-watch and self-examination, see Matthew Kadane, *The Watchful Clothier: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Capitalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

¹² M. Michelle Jarrett Morris, *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4–6; Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 89–91; Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 169–75.

¹³ Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village, Terling, 1525–1700* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), chap. 5; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 8.

scope of what that might have entailed. Third, I focus on ordinary women's speech in everyday situations rather than on extraordinary women in extraordinary circumstances. Training our ears on the words of goodwives and servants rather than Antinomians and witches allows us to observe women's words being heard and accepted in public forums rather than feared or rejected. Finally, I break down distinctions not only between oral or aural culture and print or scribal culture, but also between sight and sound as part of the sensory experience of watchfulness. Paying attention to the effects of the built environment on the transmission of information allows me to construct a material and spatial history of speech and gossip in early Boston. If we expand our understanding of how watchfulness operated, including the senses, mediums, and environments through which information traveled, our understanding of who was actively participating in the transmission of information also expands.

Asking "What will the neighbors think?" had special resonance in seventeenth-century New England, where church, town, and colony relied on evidence of character, religious correctness, and economic propriety to determine who would be welcomed into the community and who would be rejected. High levels of migration, return migration, and internal migration, coupled with religious and political upheaval both in the colonies and in old England, made judgments of character urgent in all the American colonies, but these problems were acute and particularly destabilizing in seventeenth-century New England where not just economic "credit" but also spiritual salvation was at issue. The emphasis on watchfulness within their churches led puritans to pass judgment on their neighbors, and a person's reputation was formed not only from observations of their daily "carriage" and "conversation" but also from reports received from trusted friends and family members about behavior, relationships, reading habits, and

more.¹⁴ As Robert St. George has reminded us, “If the puritanism that dominated New England society in the seventeenth century was a religion of the Word, it was a religion that admitted the potential within all kinds of words.”¹⁵ Those words were spoken, written, and shared by everyone in colonial settlements. Puritan religious culture in seventeenth-century Massachusetts was therefore shaped by the words of people at all levels of society in ways both intended and not. When communities faced disruption, disputes, or scandals, words were evidence that determined how individuals would be punished and the extent to which they would be offered opportunities for redemption. Reports and rumors that stemmed from this kind of pervasive surveillance could be dismissed as gossip, however, if the words were not handled with care. Studies of puritan discipline have focused on formal church proceedings and have not explored the everyday practice of watchfulness. The operation of reputation in membership, and how informal speech shaped church and society, have been assumed rather than investigated.¹⁶

The term “puritan” has been used in many ways by historians with divergent purposes and some have questioned whether the term is useful at all in an American context. I use the term as shorthand to describe the English settlers in Massachusetts who demanded an educated preaching ministry, emphasized the Word as received in scripture, embraced predestination, and

¹⁴ On Atlantic migration, see David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication Between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jonathan Beecher Field, *Errands into the Metropolis: New England Dissidents in Revolutionary London* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Robert St. George, “‘Heated’ Speech and Literacy in Seventeenth-Century New England,” in *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 317.

¹⁶ Examples of this literature include Emil Oberholzer Jr., *Delinquent Saints: Disciplinary Action in the Early Congregational Churches of Massachusetts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956); Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); E. Brooks Holifield, “Peace, Conflict, and Ritual in Puritan Congregations,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 551–70; Thompson, “‘Holy Watchfulness.’”

opposed what they believed were the more “popish” elements that remained in the Church of England, such as vestments and the Book of Common Prayer.¹⁷ More broadly, it describes the dominant religious culture in Massachusetts Bay colony—the culture of the rulers of church and state, but also that of everyone not explicitly opposed to them such as Baptists, Quakers, conformists, or Catholics. One did not have to be a church member, or even a “horse-shed” Christian whose commitment wavered, to be a part of the puritan regime of watchfulness.¹⁸ While religious and political disagreements with the established Church of England are significant, for the purposes of this study the most important elements of puritanism were a commitment to maintaining a community of believers through discipline and reform.¹⁹ This emphasis on discipline extended to colony and nation, but also pointed inward at the self, the family, the household, the neighborhood, and the town.

To include the talk associated with puritan surveillance or watchfulness in a category of speech called “gossip,” as I choose to do, is to stake a claim that women’s speech was an aspect of puritan knowledge politics. Gossip has traditionally been defined as a feminized activity, and Melanie Tebbutt has noted that “whenever men’s talk performs the same function as women’s gossip it is simply called something else.”²⁰ Bernard Capp argued instead that “women’s talk

¹⁷ Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 15–16.

¹⁸ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 15.

¹⁹ David Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 20–22. For other definitions, see Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 4–9; Darrett B. Rutman, *American Puritanism: Faith and Practice* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970), 6–9; Michael P. Winship, “Were There Any Puritans in New England?,” *New England Quarterly* 74 (2001): 118–38; Ann Hughes, “Introduction: Anglo-American Puritanisms,” *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000): 1–7.

²⁰ Melanie Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk?: A Social History of “Gossip” in Working Class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1997), 1. Evidence that this distinction remains relevant in the twenty-first century can be found in the slogan for the popular and now defunct celebrity and media blog Gawker, “Today’s gossip is tomorrow’s news.” <http://gawker.com/>.

was stigmatized as gossip not because it differed in character from men's, but because it was perceived as the subversive behavior of subordinates."²¹ While it is usually assumed that the topics of gossip were trivial or lacked real consequences, the information women shared was anything but trivial in a culture that understood all behavior to have cosmic importance.²² The implication that women's domestic talk was "trivial," that their concerns had no wider motivation than prurience, that their information was unverified, or that it was always malicious is countered by the puritan belief that domestic life and family government were important in their cosmic battle against Satan and watching for disorder was a religious imperative. The presumed triviality of gossip is undermined in a system that believed all behavior, all information, had the potential to reveal God's intentions and the state of one's soul. Neighborhood discussions of infidelity or paternity had cosmic implications no less than the portent of comets or earthquakes; both provided information that could presage divine judgment and provided motives to reform behavior. By marginalizing or demonizing women's words, both puritans and their historians have not only obscured the way that women's networks operated but also the ways in which their gossip was vital to a functioning society and how women's words shaped the worlds of both men and women.²³ Women's talk reveals how women functioned as central actors in communication networks and a developing politics of knowledge.

²¹ Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63.

²² John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 288. Jane Kamensky suggested that a fear of gossip's power was one reason for the development on restrictions on women's speech. Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*, 15.

²³ For a similar argument about English working-class communities in the twentieth-century, see Tebbutt, *Women's Talk*, 177.

I use a broad definition of gossip that includes at least two people talking about another person who is not present. Gossipers could be eye or ear witnesses to an event or conversation, or they could hear about it from someone else. The information exchanged tended to be personal rather than political, about affairs of the household rather than the state.²⁴ This distinction meant little in puritan culture because what happened in the “little commonwealth” of the family was very much a matter of public concern. Contrary to the distinction often made—then and now—between women’s “idle talk” and men’s “what news?”, women’s talk carried and shaped knowledge that was vital to the formation of puritan religious culture in New England. Above all, gossip was a social practice of information-sharing. Gossiping happened between and among people who communicated information to each other.²⁵ Unlike others, I also define gossip to include confidence-sharing when the person who was trusted with information talked about it to another person, even when the third party was an authority. Information spread through these conversations was not always negative but did usually include some kind of evaluation, an implicit or explicit judgment, or information that could provide safety against divine or worldly harm. Most importantly, I do not define gossip as disorderly or malicious.

²⁴ My definition of gossip is drawn from Edith B. Gelles, “Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case,” *Journal of Social History* 22 (1989): 667–83; Steve Hindle, “The Shaming of Margaret Knowsley: Gossip, Gender and the Experience of Authority in Early Modern England,” *Continuity and Change* 9 (1994): 391–419; Suzannah Lipscomb, “Crossing Boundaries: Women’s Gossip, Insults and Violence in Sixteenth-Century France,” *French History* 25 (2011): 408–26; Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, *Gossip: The Inside Scoop* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987); Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Sally Engle Merry, “Rethinking Gossip and Scandal,” in *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, ed. Donald Black, vol. 1: *Fundamentals* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 271–302; Jordan A. Litman and Mark V. Pezzo, “Individual Differences in Attitudes towards Gossip,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 38 (2005): 963–80; Kathleen A. Feeley and Jennifer Frost, “Introduction,” in *When Private Talk Goes Public: Gossip in American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk*; Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, “The Vindication of Gossip,” in *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 11–24; Ronald de Sousa, “In Praise of Gossip: Indiscretion as a Sainly Virtue,” in *Good Gossip*, 25–33; Gabriele Taylor, “Gossip as Moral Talk,” in *Good Gossip*, 34–46; Ferdinand Schoeman, “Gossip and Privacy,” in *Good Gossip*, 72–82; Louise Collins, “Gossip: A Feminist Defense,” in *Good Gossip*, 106–14; Sylvia Schein, “Used and Abused: Gossip in Medieval Society,” in *Good Gossip*, 139–53.

²⁵ Robert F. Goodman, “Introduction,” in *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 2–3.

Many studies of gossip have not adequately distinguished it from slander, defamation, rumor, and scolding. Slander and defamation were the intentional spreading of false information with the intention to discredit someone, while rumor was information that might be shared in good faith but was later revealed to be untrue. A scold was publicly insubordinate and disturbed the peace with her “railing.”²⁶ All of these kinds of disorderly speech posed threats to reputations and were potentially criminal. Gossip, in contrast, could be orderly speech and could help maintain social standards.

Slander cases have been an important source of information about how gendered, face-to-face networks functioned. Scholars who have studied women’s networks have also been able to trace friendships and kinship connections through their economic activities.²⁷ Others have explored moral communities that maintained boundaries and defended possible transgressors,

²⁶ Merry, “Rethinking Gossip and Scandal”; Robert Paine, “What Is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis,” *Man*, New Series, 2 (1967): 278–85; Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*, chap. 1; D. E. Underdown, “The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England,” in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116–36; Robert Post, “The Legal Regulation of Gossip: Backyard Chatter and the Mass Media,” in *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 65–71; Luise White, “Between Gluckman and Foucault: Historicizing Rumour and Gossip,” *Social Dynamics* 20 (1994): 75–92; Robert B. Shoemaker, “The Decline of Public Insult in London, 1660–1800,” *Past & Present* 169 (2000): 97–131; Laura Gowing, “Gender and the Language of Insult in Early Modern London,” *History Workshop Journal* 35 (1993): 1–21; Kirsten Fischer, “‘False, Feigned, and Scandalous Words’: Sexual Slander and Racial Ideology Among Whites in Colonial North Carolina,” in *The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 139–53; Clara Ann Bowler, “Carted Whores and White Shrouded Apologies: Slander in the County Courts of Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85 (October 1, 1977): 411–26; J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York*, Borthwick Papers 58 (York, UK: Saint Anthony Publishing, 1980); Martin Ingram, “‘Scolding Women Cucked or Washed’: A Crisis in Gender Relations in Early Modern England?,” in *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode and Garthine Walker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 48–80; Mary Beth Norton, “Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 3–39.

²⁷ Studies of women’s economic networks include Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “‘A Friendly Neighbor’: Social Dimensions of Daily Work in Northern Colonial New England,” *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 392–405; Joan R. Gunderson, “Kith and Kin: Women’s Networks in Colonial Virginia,” in *The Devil’s Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90–108; Lorena S. Walsh, “Community Networks in the Early Chesapeake,” in *Colonial Chesapeake Society*, ed. Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 200–241. A useful comparison can be made with working class women’s economic networks in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. See Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk*.

whether in the family or neighborhood. In particular, Michelle Jarrett Morris argued that kin networks were the primary means for policing sexual misbehavior in early New England and she discounted the role of neighborhood surveillance. Helena Wall, on the other hand, argued that the community had extensive control over family life. I argue instead that watchfulness supported family government and I take seriously the religious motives to watchfulness that stemmed from puritans' immersion in Reformed values. Parallel and intersecting networks connected household and neighborhood, mistresses and servants.²⁸ This dissertation will follow Joan Gunderson in examining the ways that women's information networks were integrated with men's, but will focus on the function of these networks in shaping New England's religious culture, which was akin to but distinct from the legal frameworks that guided the development of civil and economic culture.²⁹

Previous studies evaluated gossip as a speech-act, examined laws that governed speech, and asked how slander reflected gendered language and sexual mores, which meant they focused on women's unruly speech. I am concerned more with the ways the line was drawn between licit and unruly speech, the ways that women's gossip was understood as either a danger or a weapon of social control, the ways that authorities directed, sanctioned, authorized, and disciplined

²⁸ Morris, *Under Household Government*; Helena M. Wall, *Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁹ Gunderson, "Kith and Kin." On slander, see for example Fischer, "False, Feigned, and Scandalous Words"; Norton, "Gender and Defamation"; Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). There is an abundance of similar work on English church courts; see, for example, Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult." On economic activities, see Ulrich, "A Friendly Neighbor"; Gunderson, "Kith and Kin."

speech.³⁰ Some of these issues have been previously investigated by Jane Kamensky. In *Governing the Tongue*, she argued that the puritan emphasis on right speech served to silence women in the public sphere. I follow her in assuming that speech was fundamental to puritan understandings of their faith and of social order and by examining the relationships among speech, gender, power, and community, but I focus on orderly rather than disorderly speech and the ways that women's speech was encouraged rather than silenced. While she examined Quakers, Antinomians, witches, and other women who were punished for speaking against authority such as Anne Eaton and Anne Hibbens, I focus instead on the words women spoke in their everyday lives that were useful to authority. This study is indebted to her emphasis on speech and her description of watchfulness as "hearfulness," but I depart from her in exploring not how the tongue was governed, not limitations on speech, but on the ways that otherwise unruly speech was sometimes authorized because of the benefits it provided to the maintenance of order. While Kamensky's interest was the ways that speech was controlled and disciplined when it threatened authority, I counter this by showing that speech gave women authority in their neighborhoods and households and when authorities sparred, women's words became especially useful. Speech disciplined and controlled behavior, and women's speech was harnessed as part of the disciplinary project rather than always violating it. When women's everyday talk is included in the examination of Massachusetts's speech culture, it becomes clear that women were not silenced but were in fact talking all the time in a variety of contexts and in ways that blurred lines of authority and hierarchy. Women may have been enjoined to silence in meetinghouses, and increasingly in courtrooms, but in their daily lives they were engaged in

³⁰ Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander*; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*; Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649–1699* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

constant conversation and the topic was often the behavior and character of their neighbors, masters and mistresses, and husbands and ministers.

Gossip was of course not unique to New England, but its uses and intentions differed from other seventeenth-century Anglo-American communities. Studies of gossip in the Chesapeake colonies, for example, have found that slander and gossip resulted from a lack of institutional controls, which necessitated neighbors stepping in to police behavior in the absence of moral leadership from churches and elites.³¹ This was not so in New England, where ministers and churches loomed large in most communities and where surveilling one's neighbors was a moral and religious imperative. Policing individual reputations was particularly vital among church members, for whom others' behavior was understood as a reflection of their religious community. The reputation of a church depended on the reputations of its members, and wayward behavior could result not only in loss of reputation but also the loss of God's favor. This attention to community judgments and the words used to carry them were not, as Edmund Morgan reminded us, evidence that puritans were simply judgmental, nosy busybodies. Their interest in others' behavior, their "minding of other people's business," is evidence "not the anomalies of a diseased mind but simply the qualities demanded of a good puritan." Their covenantal theology demanded that they engage in determining who among them was regenerate to preserve the purity of their churches and also to preserve their "outward prosperity."³² Puritan

³¹ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*; Terri L. Snyder, *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Gunderson, "Kith and Kin"; Christine Eisel, "'Several Unhandsome Words': The Politics of Gossip in Early Virginia" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2012); Norton, "Gender and Defamation"; Bowler, "Carted Whores and White Shrouded Apologies."

³² Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653–1657: The Conscience of a Puritan* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1946), ix.

ideology turned all members of the community into gossips, supported and assisted by the institutions that shaped their lives such as churches and local governments.

Gossip has been a frequent topic of anthropological study. An extensive debate that began with an influential article by Max Gluckman questioned whether gossip was an activity that solidified the community and policed its boundaries or individualistic enterprise that allowed people to pursue their own ends independent of the group.³³ These studies are useful for thinking about definitions and functions of gossip, but it is important to historicize gossip and reputation. Evaluations of the functions and results of gossip in twentieth-century Native American or African groups may not necessarily transfer neatly to the particular circumstances of a transatlantic puritan community. We cannot talk about individualism and community in the same way for early modern colonists, and a social control thesis would operate differently in the context of communities dominated by churches with similar aims at unifying morality.

Studies of oral culture that have focused on extraordinary events and people rather than everyday communities of speech have obscured the place of women's speaking and listening in puritan Massachusetts. Rather than focusing on illicit speech, this dissertation approaches gossip as a form of information, mining not only the content of speech but also the networks through which it spread to uncover the ways that talk, and especially women's talk, was instrumental in

³³ Gluckman argued that gossip within small groups is an activity which cements relationships and reinforces values. Paine's response questioned the centrality of community and instead argued that gossip was the result of "self-interest." The gossipier shares information he "wishes certain people to possess" in exchange for the information they can provide to him. Peter Wilson tried to find a middle ground between these two poles, asking whether we can "try to understand the relationship between the individual venting his passion and serving his self-interest and the exercise of social control by a group over its members in the search for unity, both through the 'game' of gossip." Max Gluckman, "Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 307–16; Paine, "What Is Gossip About?"; Peter J. Wilson, "Filcher of Good Names: An Enquiry Into Anthropology and Gossip," *Man*, New Series, 9 (1974): 93–102. Patricia Spacks, a literary scholar, also intervened in this debate by examining the role of gossip in eighteenth-century literature in an effort to "restore positive meaning to a word that had once held it, and to celebrate a set of values and assumptions particularly associated with women, as well as with gossip." Spacks, *Gossip*, x.

the formation, adaptation, maintenance, and undermining of early New England's religious culture. Women's speech was most contested during moments of colony-wide disruption such as witchcraft trials, the Antinomian controversy, or the Quaker incursion, but women's words and who heard them were complicated even in everyday interactions that had more mundane consequences. This dissertation looks for the broader implications of women's talk, including how it shaped churches, neighborhoods, households, and clerical careers, and how officials relied upon it while also trying to place boundaries around it. The concept of "holy watching" allowed authorities in New England to harness gossip in socially constructive ways. Surveillance was pursued both formally, through law enforcement, and informally through spying and gossip. Women's talk was pivotal to the enforcement of puritan morality and was legitimized by tenets of watchfulness.

This project was originally conceived as a history of women's reading practices. I found myself increasingly drawn, however, to the ways that women and men continued to inhabit a face-to-face oral culture that risks being obscured by a focus on the printed word. For puritans in New England, speech, talk, and gossip were as much a part of their devotional practice as reading religious works and hearing the Word preached. In these conversations were the forces that shaped the lived experience of religion in New England, and the words that women chose to speak or leave unspoken helped shape the evolving religious culture of the puritan enterprise in North America. When viewed through the lens of speech culture, women could be both "disorderly" subjects of gossip and "goodwives" that were trusted sources of information and, significantly, these categories were permeable. Examining women's involvement in oral and aural information networks reveals just how ineffective these distinctions are for understanding women's lives in puritan Massachusetts. The practice of watchfulness created tension between

the goal of creating order and the power of women's and lower status people's talk. It also harnessed what would otherwise have been illicit speech in the service of the state as a way of containing disorder. Examining the ways that women's words were deployed and sanctioned allows a reassessment of women's roles in puritanism and in Protestantism more broadly. Debates have raged about the effects of the Protestant Reformations on women, but I argue that the question should be reframed, that asking about relative improvements or diminishment of status is less important than determining how women and men resolved the contradictory messages for women inherent in the puritan system.³⁴

Massachusetts authorities relied on gossip but also tried to discipline it, and by sanctioning this kind of talk they provided a potential leveling device as well as a way of reinforcing authority. This dissertation shows how the imperative to watchfulness, embedded in civil law and in covenanted churches, intersected with the negative view of gossip and gossiping women in particular. Women's status as souls equal before God with an obligation to participate in the practice of "holy watchfulness," coupled with early modern suspicions of women's speech and gossip more generally, illuminates broader tensions over lay authority and congregational church structure. No studies to date have systematically and intensively studied the relationship

³⁴ Just a small sample of this literature includes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "John Winthrop's City of Women," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 3 (2001): 19–48; Amanda Porterfield, "Women's Attraction to Puritanism," *Church History* 60 (1991): 196–209; Diane Willen, "Godly Women in Early Modern England: Puritanism and Gender," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43 (1992): 561–80; Debra L. Parish, "The Power of Female Pietism: Women as Spiritual Authorities and Religious Role Models in Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of Religious History* 17 (1992): 33–46; Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly* 30 (1978): 582–601. Lyndal Roper has argued that the German Reformation had a fundamentally conservative effect on gender roles in the family and that this social reformation demonstrates that "gender relations...were at the crux of the Reformation itself." Merry Wiesner argued that the tendency to equate the history of women during the Reformation with histories of the family have led to "seeing the family as the sole determinant of women's lives" and that it subsequently "ignores women's intellectual and political history while conversely ignoring male sexuality and familial roles and gender restrictions on men." Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5; Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 316.

between the puritan imperative to “watchfulness” and the ways in which gossip and reputation shaped puritan religious culture, and the recent focus on the role of laity has not radically adjusted the sense that puritanism was fundamentally shaped by the written word and by men that has prevailed since Perry Miller.³⁵ While male laity also confronted tensions between individual spiritual equality and earthly subordination, both the prescriptions and lived experience were different for women because of the influence of the gender system.³⁶ Women found ways to navigate the tenuous and shifting boundary between orderly and disorderly behavior, and they evaluated that boundary for others. New England’s women were active participants in defining their own social and cultural roles as women and their place in New England’s churches.

Both men and women gossip but I focus on women’s speech in large part because gossip was a feminized category. Exploring women’s talk allows me to investigate the gendered politics of speech in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, uncovering whose talk was authorized and what they were allowed to talk about, and to what extent that speech was legitimized by male authorities in church and state. Those authorities tried to rein in the threatening aspects of

³⁵ Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy In Massachusetts 1630–1950* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1933); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1939); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953); David D. Hall, “Toward a History of Popular Religion in Early New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 41 (1984): 49–55; David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*; Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986); Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995); Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Teresa Toulouse, *The Art of Prophesying: New England Sermons and the Shaping of Belief* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Laura Henigman, *Coming into Communion: Pastoral Dialogues in Colonial New England* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

³⁶ Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Harry Stout, “Word and Order in Colonial New England,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 19–38.

women's speech not just by limiting it, as Kamensky argued, but also by putting it in the service of social order, moral policing, and surveillance. Studies of the gendered practices of gossip have argued that it formed an alternate or informal "public," a forum for the "small politics of the neighborhood."³⁷ I argue instead that gossip was integral to the formal public as well as the informal one, and that there is little meaningful distinction to be made between the two during the seventeenth century. Gossip and watchfulness reveal women participating in and influencing religion, culture, and politics on a stage normally assumed to have been reserved for men alone. To say that women's words affected the development of puritan religious culture is not to dismiss the very real restrictions they faced on their public activities and formal roles, but it is to ask how women's public influence has been rendered invisible, both in the seventeenth century and since, by labeling their words as "idle talk" and separating domestic concerns from public life. This approach increases the number of actors we can see creating, transforming, and sustaining culture in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. I follow Robert St. George in arguing that "spoken conversation" was "the principal genre in which seventeenth-century individuals constructed and maintained social reality."³⁸ While women's speech may have been constrained in court and in church, especially in the latter half of the century, their words were vital and encouraged in the informal, intimate world of neighborhood, household, and family. This allowed women to have indirect influence over the functioning of society in the absence of something we can recognize as formal roles in government and churches.³⁹

³⁷ Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*.

³⁸ St. George, "'Heated' Speech," 278.

³⁹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Vintage, 1980); Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*; Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*; Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*.

This dissertation is part of a broader historiographic debate about how to understand public and private in early America. Evidence of gossip, of people talking about each other in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, has the capacity to demonstrate what kinds of speech were considered private and what kinds were of public interest, and indeed calls into question whether we can usefully talk about either private speech or private spaces. I disagree with David Flaherty's assertions that the church-state surveillance systems were weak and therefore afforded puritans a high degree of privacy.⁴⁰ Certainly, puritans themselves made a distinction between speech that took place in small groups in people's homes and meetings that took place in public or common spaces such as meetinghouses. But public life was more than meetinghouse, town house, and court house; it took place in streets, in ordinaries, on doorsteps, and even inside homes. Speech that originated in small groups in a bedchamber or barn could become evidence in a disciplinary hearing or a court case, showing that public and private were understood in more complex ways than setting or participants.

The meanings of public and private shifted with context. In some senses, private simply meant not public. A public conversation could be one that was simply not private, that is, not between only two people. Public and private could also distinguish between a gathering of church members and a gathering of the whole congregation, regenerate and unregenerate alike. An offense could be private if it only involved a few people, but the same dispute could be public if its effects disturbed good order or if those involved decided to talk to others about it. What public and private did not delineate was particular demarcated spaces. Households were not automatically private and streets or fields were not necessarily public. Context was the defining factor. Fundamentally, that which was private was not in the "public interest." A

⁴⁰ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*.

public space was one to which access was not restricted, a public offence was one that affected the whole community. What all agreed was that attempts at secrecy or concealment were only ever nefarious.⁴¹ Much of the historiography has focused on whether privacy was possible or desirable and has equated it with interiority, solitude, and individualism. In the context of gossip and reputation, those are unproductive questions. More important is that the inhabitants of seventeenth-century New England used the terms to describe and define settings and the nature of offences, and that they understood “public” and “private” in ways that do not equate to modern sensibilities. Since covenant theology dictated that all sins could bring God’s judgment upon the community, puritans could have concluded that all sins were of public concern. That they did not preclude the possibility of privacy meant that they were in some way trying to contain the information. Private offences must be resolved, but they need not be publicized.

Reconceptualizing women’s public roles to include their everyday lives and their conversations restores their significance in early New England society.⁴² A fundamental component of gossip and its effects on reputation stemmed from the way that it blurred and crossed boundaries between public and private speech. Words spoken in conversation in houses and fields, on porches and in the street, all had the same power to bolster or sully the reputation of another as they were carried from these informal chats to the meetinghouse and courtroom.

⁴¹ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 10–11. My thinking on privacy and the public/private distinction have been influenced by Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Linda A. Pollock, “Living on the Stage of the World: The Concept of Privacy among the Elite of Early Modern England,” in *Rethinking Social History: English Society 1570–1920 and Its Interpretation*, ed. Adrian Wilson (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), 78–96; John Brewer, “This, That and the Other: Public, Social and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformation of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 1–21; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*.

⁴² Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 55–60. See also Nan Goodman, *Banished: Common Law and the Rhetoric of Social Exclusion in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Morris, *Under Household Government*; Wall, *Fierce Communion*.

Attention to the places these words were spoken and how they spread shows that the distinction between public and private spaces or activities was tenuous and easily obliterated.⁴³ Women's talk, and especially their sanctioned talk about domestic affairs, could also have public importance in a culture that saw public significance in all things. Private speech could formulate and cement public reputations of individuals and create or enforce the boundaries of community. As historians have sought to uncover women's activities in the past and to refute the claim that women's lives were wholly separate from men's public and political activities, the analysis of gender has often become a question about how categories of "public" and "private" have intersected with gendered behavioral prescriptions. Historicizing the operation of public and private and the ways those categories have and have not mapped onto the man/woman binary provides a way of getting at the power relations that "gender" seeks to identify.

Just as studies of women's public lives have focused on the eighteenth century, so have many of the most sustained investigations of gossip, reputation, and communication. Some have questioned how gossip functioned in an increasingly impersonal world in which the growth of cities, increased and diversified immigration, and Atlantic commercial networks made "credit" both more important and more difficult to verify.⁴⁴ Communications networks were shifting and

⁴³ Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*, 21ff; Snyder, *Brabbling Women*. Recent work on colonial Anglo-America and the Early Republic has taken thoughtful approaches to these questions by focusing on the ways that a public/private dichotomy has been mapped—both historically and by historians—onto the early American sex-gender system. Mary Beth Norton showed how gender, though still operating as a system of power in the early modern world, was not the primary way of determining who could appropriately act in the political public during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mary Beth Norton, *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). See also Ruth H. Bloch, "Inside and Outside the Public Sphere," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005): 99–106; Mary P. Ryan, "The Public and the Private Good: Across the Great Divide in Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 15 (2003): 10–27.

⁴⁴ A small selection includes Nancy F. Cott, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," *Journal of Social History* 10 (1976): 20–43; Karen V. Hansen, "The Power of Talk in Antebellum New England," *Agricultural History* 67 (1993): 43–64; Gelles, "Gossip"; Patricia U. Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 51–80.

transforming as print communication was expanding, manuscript publication remained salient, and face-to-face oral communication was challenged by migration, distance, and changing community structures. These studies have defined knowledge and information very narrowly as theology, business, or governmental interests and have privileged the kinds of communication that were dominated by men—learned literature, letters sharing business and economic information, and political chatter.⁴⁵ Investigations of puritan communication networks have focused on the circulation of men’s, and usually ministers’, letters and books across the Atlantic.⁴⁶ Women were also involved in these conversations but they were not realms in which women were sanctioned, visible actors. These parameters, along with the privileging of print, have effectively written women out of the narrative of knowledge politics and information networks in the early modern Anglo-American world, but women also circulated information, both among groups of women and in mixed-gender networks.⁴⁷ Women availed themselves of

⁴⁵ Norman S. Fiering, “The Transatlantic Republic of Letters: A Note on the Circulation of Learned Periodicals to Early Eighteenth-Century America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976): 642–60; Sheila McIntyre, “‘I Hear It So Variouslly Reported’: News-Letters, Newspapers, and the Ministerial Network in New England, 1670–1730,” *New England Quarterly* 71 (1998): 593–614; Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); F. J. Levy, “How Information Spread among the Gentry, 1550–1640,” *Journal of British Studies* 21 (1982): 11–34; Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Joanne Freeman examined the idea of “political gossip” and identified ways in which this kind of talk could have wide-reaching influence on public affairs, but she only explored talk that happened among men. Joanne B. Freeman, “Slander, Poison, Whispers, and Fame: Jefferson’s ‘Anas’ and Political Gossip in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995): 25–57; Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), chap. 2.

⁴⁶ Foster, *The Long Argument*; Francis J. Bremer, *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610–1692* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994); Alison Searle, “‘Though I Am a Stranger to You by Face, Yet in Neere Bonds by Faith’: A Transatlantic Puritan Republic of Letters,” *Early American Literature* 43 (2008): 277–308. Other useful models for studying these communication networks focus on the Great Awakening. See, for example, John Fea, “Wheelock’s World: Letters and the Communication of Revival in Great Awakening New England,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 109 (1999): 99–144.

⁴⁷ An important exception is Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

the same avenues of dissemination on which men relied, though without the same access to print authorship—they gave and received information in letters and through word of mouth, they attended church disciplinary proceedings, and they were privy to activities of the colonial and local governments, either through witnessing these themselves or hearing about them in their homes and on the street. When “information” is defined to include topics usually assumed to be “personal” or “private,” such as evaluations of character or stories about behavior, knowledge that passed as gossip can be seen shaping New England’s emerging and volatile religious culture. Redefining gossip as a form of information that intersected with other types of communication such as print, manuscript, and men’s public speech not only reveals a range of actors participating in shaping New England’s early religious culture, but also underscores the inadequacies of definitions that separate men’s and women’s talk.

Patricia Spacks suggested that attention to gossip can help us address “questions about boundaries, authority, distance, [and] the nature of knowledge.”⁴⁸ I focus on the mechanics of gossip’s dissemination in seventeenth-century New England, asking how, when, and by whom gossip was deployed; under what circumstances it was considered legitimate speech and when was it a violation of community standards; who was allowed to spread information and influence reputations; whose reputations were susceptible to women’s words and whose were not; whose talk was considered reliable; and how gossip was transformed into testimony and evidence, for good and ill. This study begins with the puritan migration to New England, during which small communities of supposedly like-minded people established new towns in what they saw as a hostile wilderness, and ends at the turn of the century when puritan hegemony was giving way to crown-imposed religious toleration and when male authorities reasserted their prerogative to

⁴⁸ Spacks, *Gossip*, 12.

watchfulness through increased attention to a “reformation of manners.” By the end of the century, women’s informal information networks were sidelined and marginalized as puritan saturation waned and enforcement was increasingly in the hands of male officials. Women’s talk still mattered but it had less official sanction and less credibility as their talk stopped being seen as watchfulness and was increasingly dismissed as “idle.” The breakdown in that local mechanism for social control led to the co-opting of gossip by male authorities in the form of a “reformation of manners” and the role of gossip was increasingly subsumed by institutionalized watching by law enforcement and minister’s visits. Women’s talk still helped police families and communities, but official watchfulness held sway over a dwindling proportion of the population.

This dissertation surveys the ways that reputation was solidified and communicated by women’s words within the relatively closed communities that comprised the New England colonies. Instead of a tightly focused community study, however, this inquiry shows the limits of those boundaries by describing the ways that knowledge about neighbors spread throughout the colonies both despite of and because of gossip’s fundamentally local character. Women’s words may have been heard primarily in meetinghouses and on doorsteps, but they resonated in a wide geographic space as they were carried orally, in manuscript, and in print. Gossip was potent but usually ephemeral and often left only shadows and glimpses in extant sources, so this project casts a wide net and includes not only court and church records but also diaries, letters, probate records and wills, petitions, printed treatises, town and colony records, and contemporary histories. I make careful and selective use of antiquarian town and church histories written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because these authors often had use of documents that have been subsequently lost or destroyed, and because their descriptions of local personalities and scandals capture something in the way of public memory of gossip. Keepers of church and

court records emphasized the importance of accuracy, which makes these records the most reliable sources, and others are treated with the skepticism they deserve.

Chapters one and two establish the mechanics of official watchfulness and survey the institutional frameworks that defined it. They focus on the ways male authorities built watchfulness into the structures that governed church and state and how those authorities relied on the observations of others to enforce community order. These chapters explain how puritan ideas about surveillance and watchfulness combined with older frameworks of communal surveillance and how social order, family government, and moral enforcement relied on ordinary people's observations. Chapter one reviews how watchfulness functioned in Massachusetts's puritan churches by tracing the uses of gossip and rumor in regulating church membership, from baptism to membership admissions to discipline. Careful attention to the uses of watchfulness and reputation shows how ministers, elders, church members, and unregenerate congregants all participated in the creation, policing, and redefinition of community boundaries through sharing information about others. Community talk made sainthood visible through surveillance, testimony, and reputation and informed both punishments and reconciliations. Despite prohibitions on women's speech in the meetinghouse and other adaptations that altered the experience of church membership for women despite assertions of equality before God, the church relied on their private speech and their participation in the regime of watchfulness. Chapter two turns the lens on law enforcement and on the elaborate and evolving apparatus used to watch suspicious times, places, and people. Civil government harnessed watchfulness and older traditions of surveillance to encourage the community to watch for and report criminal behavior. Methods of punishment also encouraged the community to look at the criminal body and marked transgressors in ways that perpetuated the shame of their offenses. Just as

watchfulness helped make saints visible, it also helped make criminality visible and extended surveillance beyond the godly. Both churches and the law used official sanction to turn gossip into an imperative.

After surveying the institutional frameworks that underpinned and encouraged community surveillance, chapters three and four investigate how watchfulness functioned in less formal contexts and in the daily lives of Boston's inhabitants. These chapters form the heart of the dissertation, showing how gossip and watchfulness intersected in everyday interactions and how women's speech helped police the patriarchal family. Chapter three uses a well-documented divorce case to show the interplay between neighborhood and family. Katherine Naylor's divorce from her husband Edward and subsequent court cases against him reveal how neighbors enforced family order by supporting patriarchal ideals and by taking the place of an inadequate household governor. Testimony and depositions in these cases show how women in the community observed disorderly behavior, including domestic violence, fornication and adultery, drunkenness, and failure to perform marital duties. By investigating the operation of informal watchfulness, this chapter also exposes how official surveillance could be inoperative or ineffective when disorder took place behind closed doors. Much of the surveillance of the Naylor's household was conducted by servants, and chapter four turns attention to the young women who served as domestic help in Massachusetts Bay households. Servants had an obligation to keep their household's secrets, but they were also expected to aid those in power by speaking out about what they saw and heard. This chapter explains how women's access to intimate spaces countered hierarchical relationships and therefore gave high stakes to servants' words. Servants were vulnerable to gossip and the community was invested in keeping watch over them, but servants could also harness their access in households to keep watch on their

masters and mistresses and to protect themselves against mistreatment. Service was meant to serve as moral education for young women but in practice servants, masters, and mistresses were always observing each other while being observed, complicating the lines of status and authority in even a well-ordered household. Just as watchfulness authorized feminized speech for all church members, it also authorized lower status people to exercise their servitude by surveilling their superiors.

Chapters four and five tell the story of gossip and watchfulness from opposite sides, showing how the lowest and the highest status inhabitants of Boston used gossip and were subject to its effects, each with their own special vulnerabilities. While chapter four describes the role of lower status people in perpetuating a culture of watchfulness, chapter five returns to the structures and institutions presented in the first two chapters, investigating the lived experience of watchfulness for those who preached about it. This chapter explores the consequences of gossip for some of the most powerful men in New England, men who were supposed to direct and shape the ways watchfulness functioned but were not immune to its effects. Studies of gossip and rumor have often noted that women were particularly vulnerable to accusations of sexual impropriety.⁴⁹ This chapter turns that question on its head and asks what happened when the most prominent men in society were accused of sexual transgressions. Surveying six cases in which ministers were accused of sexual impropriety, all outside of Boston, I investigate not only how and when gossip allowed powerful men to be held accountable for their sins but also explore how geographic places influenced the way gossip traveled. In each case, the extant sources are limited to authors with vested interests in how the

⁴⁹ See, for example, Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 99–103; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735,” *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 20–40; Norton, “Gender and Defamation”; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*.

men and their transgressions would be remembered, which effected the way that women's words have been remembered or forgotten.

A short epilogue describes conditions at the turn of the eighteenth century, when the imposition of a new royal charter brought an end to the illusion of puritan social and cultural hegemony. Informal watchfulness could no longer be hoped or considered to be a totalizing mechanism against disorder. At the same time, churches sought to expand their membership by abandoning public confessions that had previously exposed potential saints to scrutiny before the congregation. Puritan churches became increasingly closed societies and members were reluctant to air their grievances and faults to non-members while under the threat of enforced toleration and sectarian competition. In this environment of uncertainty and waning authority, Cotton Mather sought to organize Societies for the Suppression of Disorders, associations of prominent men who took responsibility for overseeing the morals of their neighbors. These societies were separate from the church structures that had previously organized watchfulness. Authorizing private male citizens to act as public consciences circumvented the role that women had held as moral arbiters and carriers of important information about order and disorder in their communities.

Throughout this dissertation, I pay special attention to the built environment and the sensory experience of watchfulness. Visual cues were important in early New England, conveying information and symbolic purpose, but watching was not only visual. Ears were attuned to unusual sounds such as cries in the night or furtive conversations. Women's mobility and their access to specific spaces gave them particular avenues to observe behavior and conversations, and the spaces they occupied were permeable to both sight and sound. The

material and spatial components of puritan culture in New England facilitated a culture of watchfulness.

* * *

The question that animated my initial interest in this topic was what distinguishes gossip from news. I did not anticipate that during the course of researching and writing this dissertation, news would be overwhelmed with gossip in a wave of sexual harassment and assault allegations against a series of famous men. As prominent men in entertainment, politics, sports, academia, and literature have been confronted with accusations of sexual harassment and violence, women have detailed the ways that they tried to keep each other safe and the ways that they were silenced. These stories, and the Me Too movement that has gained prominence in their wake, have shown more powerfully than I could have imagined that the difference between news and gossip is primarily one of authorship and of timing. Who talks, who hears, and who listens can determine the seriousness with which stories are taken. Women's words are often discounted or considered suspect unless the number of victims willing to come forward reaches some kind of critical mass or until other motives make listening to women expedient. My research shows that at least since the seventeenth century women have talked to each other about topics vital to their safety and their status, and their words have shaped culture in ways that have been largely unseen. Men in seventeenth-century Massachusetts knew that women's words had heft, power, and vital information that could sustain or undermine society's goals. The last several years have been a fruitful and wrenching time to be researching and thinking about the function of gossip networks. In this context it has been difficult to think of gossip as anything other than a positive good, and even more difficult to take early modern gossip on its own terms. I have done my best.

A Note on Language

Spelling has been modernized to allow readers the same ease with the language that hearers would have had at the time. Spelling of names has been standardized, and abbreviations have been spelled out. Dates have not been modernized.

CHAPTER ONE

Holy Watchfulness: Surveillance and Speech in the Puritan Church

In her late nineteenth century study of New England's early churches, Alice Morse Earle reported that "the pulpit of one old, unpainted church retained until the middle of this century, as its sole decoration, an enormous, carefully painted, staring eye, a terrible and suggestive illustration to youthful wrong-doers of the great, all-seeing eye of God."¹ This story probably describes a decoration from the eighteenth century or was perhaps apocryphal but it represents well the culture of watchfulness that pervaded the seventeenth-century meetinghouse environment. It was not only the "all-seeing eye of God" that might have caused sinners to squirm, however, but also the eyes of their fellow congregants, the elders, and the minister that were always meant to be on their fellows, keeping watch for misconduct, sin, and hypocrisy. Watchfulness in New England's puritan churches was structured in a way that meant everyone was subject to it, whether within or without the covenant, but church members were uniquely vulnerable to the consequences of judgments about ongoing transgressions or the dredging up of long-ago observations. Using a complex and interlocking set of processes, these churches harnessed talk to protect themselves from hypocrites and from God's wrath while also disciplining it to maintain community harmony and preserve both individual and collective reputations.

Speech was a vital component of the meetinghouse environment and of the experience of church membership for both women and men, but women received contradictory messages about

¹ Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 16.

when and how to speak appropriately. The meetinghouse was a sensory as well as a spiritual location in which oral and aural perception as well as sight were vital to the experience of pious practice. Meetinghouses were organized in ways that focused attention not only on the Word being preached from the pulpit but also on displays of hierarchy and status in the pews and seats, giving physical form to puritan theories of watchfulness. There were subtle differences between the ways that men and women were supposed to assert their voices and make themselves heard in the rituals and processes that governed church members' lives. Although prescriptions for lay behavior often asserted churchgoers' right to speak, women were often excluded from being heard publicly by distinctions drawn between the equality of believers before God in the spiritual realm and the earthly submission of women that was part of a hierarchical and patriarchal culture. Women may not have voiced their own words before the congregation but they did speak and their words were vital to church governance, including the admission of new members and the exercise of discipline.

Puritan church membership and discipline are some of the oldest topics in the history of American puritanism. While this may seem well-covered territory, this chapter explores these complex institutional practices with a specific set of analytical concerns. Revisiting puritan meetinghouses with attention to the sensory dimensions of puritan worship and discipline, the determinative role of speech, and boundaries drawn between public and private in both church proceedings and daily life allows a reevaluation of how puritan culture was constituted and whose voices helped shape it. As English settlers attempted to create and sustain a godly community in America, free from many of the restraints they fought in old England, they were forced to reckon with the consequences of implementing what had only been theorized previously. Women often found themselves, in these circumstances, facing contradictions

between prescriptions for godly behavior and a goodwife's speech. Focusing attention on watchfulness as the foundation of puritan discipline reshapes our understanding of lay participation in New England's religious life.

**“to meet constantly together in one congregation”²
Speech and Watchfulness in the Meetinghouse**

New England puritans' emphasis on speech began in the meetinghouse. These buildings did not have a standard form and the earliest of them were often hastily built to accommodate both religious and civic functions, but they were all designed to focus attention on the Word preached. They maximized and directed sensory experience in a way that enabled and gave physical form to their theories of watchfulness. Meetinghouses were built near the center of new English settlements, often on a small rise, and were initially large enough to accommodate most of the inhabitants. Modeled first after large houses, barns, or urban marketplaces, these buildings were pointedly unsanctified but nevertheless served as the center of spiritual, religious, and community life. Despite efforts and expenditures laid out for meetinghouse construction, the buildings were not particularly robust and some meetinghouses were rebuilt multiple times during the seventeenth century not only because the congregation outgrew them but also because they were literally falling apart. Even the newer and more sturdy meetinghouses were unheated and frigid in winter and sweltering in summer, and dark except for those nearest the windows.³

² Williston Walker, ed., “A Platform of Church Discipline, 1648,” in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1893), 208.

³ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 170; Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill 1630–1783* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1952), 50–51, 57; Hugh Morrison, *Early American Architecture: From the First Colonial Settlements to the National Period* (New York: Dover, 1952); Marian Card Donnelly, *The New England Meeting Houses of the Seventeenth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 13–18, 44–46.

Every week on the Sabbath and lecture days, and on special days of thanksgiving or humiliation, the town's inhabitants would leave their homes and walk to the meetinghouse in the center of their settlement. As they walked, they would be able to observe those who stayed at home or sat at their porches, children who played in the streets and fields, and servants who remained at work in violation of Sabbath rules. Before congregants began arriving, the meetinghouse steps would have been cleared of the livestock that sometimes slept there and the birds that flew in the rafters of the high ceiling. In most places dogs would have been kept out of the meetinghouse but at least some churches allowed them to sleep on the steps up to the pulpit even during the meeting. Arriving at the meetinghouse, congregants would file through the doors, perhaps in order of status and sometimes through gender-segregated entrances, and would walk past notices or even wolves' heads tacked to the doors or posts before filing into their assigned seats or pews.⁴ Because this was the one place where the whole community gathered, meetinghouses were a site of information-sharing through visual, oral, and aural means.

While the focus was meant to be on the auditory experience of hearing sermons, that experience would have been dependent on other senses, particularly the hard benches on which congregants were seated and the location of their seats within the building. The earliest meetinghouses had simple wooden benches, sometimes with a small support at the back that would not have added much comfort during hours of sitting. For most of the seventeenth century, men and women were seated separately and seats were assigned based on status by a committee appointed for that purpose, with women's seats mirroring their husbands or household heads. After midcentury when meetinghouses were rebuilt and became both larger and more

⁴ Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 61; Peter Benes, *Meetinghouses of Early New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 18, 25.

established, some churches introduced a limited number of family pews that could be purchased by higher status members as a way to finance church construction and repairs. These pews were often elaborately carved or decorated and sometimes included folding writing desks to facilitate note-taking. Lower status attendees continued to sit on benches in less desirable and least visible locations at the back or in galleries, and the lowest status individuals such as youths and servants or slaves often sat in stairwells where they were less able to be watched and also less able to hear. Seating in the meetinghouse and the construction of galleries prioritized auditory distance to the pulpit, with the preferred seats being those where congregants could most easily hear words spoken from the pulpit. Some congregations even had a “deaf pew” near the front of the meetinghouse where those with hearing impairments were seated. New England’s inhabitants would have occupied their spots in the meetinghouse with regularity, not only on Sabbaths but also for weekday lectures, for special days of thanksgiving or humiliation, and for other civic events such as elections or trials.⁵

Once seated, focus would intentionally be drawn to the pulpit set on the long side of the room opposite the main entrance, the visual and auditory focal point of the interior. The pulpit was raised off the ground and reached by a small flight of stairs to maximize both visibility and hearing. Testers of various shapes would have helped direct the minister’s voice to the seats and compensated for the high ceiling that might otherwise muffle their oratory. The position and prominence of the pulpit emphasized the authority of the spoken word. Sermons were meant to

⁵ Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, 79; Benes, *Meetinghouses of Early New England*, 14; Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 100–113; Robert J. Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House in Early Massachusetts,” *New England Quarterly* 43 (1970): 450–64; Robert F. Trent, “The Marblehead Pews,” in *New England Meeting House and Church: 1630–1850*, ed. Peter Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings (Boston: Boston University, 1979), 101–11; Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing, or, Newes from New-England* (London: W. E. and I. G. for Nath. Butter, 1642), 19–20. On seating in old England, see Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 140; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 54.

be extemporaneous rather than recited or read, and this lesson in the authority of speech was carried over into churchgoers' daily lives. While the pulpits in many ways mimicked what settlers had known in their parish churches in England, meetinghouses came to resemble theaters more than those churches as galleries were added to accommodate the increasing population, seats in the back were elevated to improve sight and hearing, and pulpits were raised higher off the floor. The pulpit was meant to be visible to all, but the congregants were also on stage and easily observed from the seats occupied by elders and deacons that were placed in front of the pulpit, facing the congregation. As congregants sat in their seats or pews, listening to sermons and singing psalms but also perhaps chatting with their neighbors or tutting at the behavior of those around them, they were ever under the observant gaze of the most eminent men in the church.⁶ In this environment, New Englanders were trained to listen, to focus on spoken words, and to remember what they heard, but they were also continually reminded that they were being watched.

Morning Sabbath services began with a prayer followed by an exegesis of a verse or chapter from scripture. The congregation sang a psalm in their peculiar and defiantly cacophonous way and then settled in for a sermon that lasted about an hour followed by another prayer.⁷ Sermons were timed with an hourglass kept on a stand near the pulpit and certainly some must have shifted in their seats when the deacon turned the glass and the pastor or teacher

⁶ Robert Blair St. George, "Style and Structure in the Joinery of Dedham and Medfield, Massachusetts, 1635–1685," *Winterthur Portfolio* 13 (1979): 7; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 100–109; Trent, "The Marblehead Pews"; Benes, *Meetinghouses of Early New England*, 14–16, 191–92; Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power*, xvi–xvii, 15–17.

⁷ On psalm-singing, see Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety*, 111–16; Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, 202–22; Glenda Goodman, "'The Tears I Shed at the Songs of Thy Church': Seventeenth-Century Musical Piety in the English Atlantic World," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65 (2012): 691–725; John Atlee Kouwenhoven, "Some Unfamiliar Aspects of Singing in New England 1620–1810," *New England Quarterly* 6 (1933): 567–88.

showed no sign of wrapping up.⁸ The congregation then left for a midday meal, returning in the afternoon for another prayer, psalm, and sermon. Afternoon Sabbath services concluded with baptisms and a collection. Contributions were made according to status, with each congregant taking his or her turn to walk up to the deacon's seat and place their money or pledge into the box, or to lay a contribution in kind before his seat. Thomas Lechford, an English lawyer who wrote an exposé of New England's churches after a brief sojourn in Massachusetts, recalled that the order in which contributions were made was "magistrates and chief gentlemen first, and then the elders, and all the congregation of men, and most of them that are not of the church, all single persons, widows, and women in absence of their husbands."⁹ The church members then addressed any pressing business, such as admission of new members or disciplinary matters. Churches varied on whether non-members were allowed to observe these proceedings, but only male members were allowed to vote. The Sabbath therefore gathered the community for the entire day, during which the observations of one's friends and neighbors would have been unavoidable. Even those who failed to attend would have had their absences noted. While much of puritan devotional practice was inward-facing, the meetinghouse highlighted social aspects of their faith and practice.¹⁰

On some Sundays, usually once a month, the members celebrated the Lord's Supper after the conclusion of the morning's exercises. The congregation was notified a couple weeks in advance and on the day that the sacrament was to be administered, non-members would depart after the morning services and the members would stay in their seats while the ministers and

⁸ Benes, *Meetinghouses of Early New England*, 30.

⁹ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 18–19.

¹⁰ Lechford, 16–19; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 129–30; Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety*, chap. 4.

elders sat around the table that had been set in front of the pulpit for the purpose. The charger and cup were passed around for each member to partake, first to those around the table and then to those in their assigned seats. Some churches allowed non-members to stay and observe the Lord's Supper but only visible saints were allowed to participate.¹¹ In all of these rituals, Massachusetts churchgoers put their status on display. The order of their seating, the procession for contribution, their participation in the sacraments or their departure prior to church business, all demonstrated to their neighbors where each belonged in the social and spiritual hierarchy of the community.

The physical environment of the meetinghouse enhanced these displays of status and focused attention on the sensory experience of churchgoing. Speaking and listening, watching and hearing were vital to the spiritual and social experience of New England's churches. Being under surveillance did not prevent restless churchgoers from being distracted, misbehaving, or making their own entertainment. Women tussled over seating, socialized, and attended to small children; youths behaved so rudely that they were eventually moved to more visible seating; and some men even got in fistfights during the sermon.¹² Still, the physical environment of the meetinghouse and the performance of status and hierarchy within it helped shape a culture that encouraged and reinforced both auditory and visual surveillance. New England churchgoers were trained to watch and observe, and to be watched, during the long hours they spent in their seats in the meetinghouse. They learned, too, that watchfulness extended beyond its obvious connection to sight and encompassed other senses, most importantly their sense of hearing.

¹¹ Robert G. Pope, ed., *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske, 1644–1675*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 47, Collections (Boston: The Society, 1974), 39; Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 17.

¹² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records* 4:136, 239–43; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, vol. 5 (Boston: William White, 1854), 60–61.

“church-power one over another mutually”¹³
Watchfulness in New and Old England

The emphasis on watchfulness in New England’s churches highlighted a conceptual shift in the way they thought about surveillance and authority that had been facilitated by their migration. Puritans had long been critical of the Church of England’s disciplinary apparatus and its lack of moral surveillance, but they had also been an embattled minority for decades, forced into secrecy by ecclesiastical surveillance wielded against them. Ministers and laymen alike had been punished in ecclesiastical courts for their lack of conformity—ministers had been deprived of their livings and conventicles were forced into secrecy.¹⁴ Speech and surveillance were useful tools of religious control during the tumultuous English Reformations and the ongoing and shifting religious controversies led conformists and nonconformists to keep a careful eye on each other while maintaining awareness that they too were being watched. One aspiring communicant in the Wenham, Massachusetts, church reported that while in England she had lived in a place where she was “watched by others,” presumably conformists scrutinizing potential dissenters, and had to attend nonconformist sermons “secretly.”¹⁵ This was a common fear among dissenters, who were in danger of punishment by ecclesiastical courts for rejecting conformist practice.¹⁶ But it was not only their enemies who were watching. There was an inherent tension in reformers’ position because they feared reprisal for being nonconformist while also needing to

¹³ Walker, “Cambridge Platform,” 207–8.

¹⁴ Martin Ingram, “Puritans and the Church Courts, 1560–1640,” in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1996), 58–91; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 364–72. English puritans had often found themselves the targets of ecclesiastical courts. See Ingram, “Puritans and the Church Courts.” The Congregational system precluded any centralized ecclesiastical authority, including courts, because each church was responsible for its own disciplinary proceedings. See Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 163.

¹⁵ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 8.

¹⁶ Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 156.

perform nonconformity for others in their community. The solution implemented in New England was to forgo any consolidated disciplinary organization and instead locate moral regulation, church government, and discipline in each individual congregation, with significant power vested in laypeople rather than an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Watchfulness was not new in New England, and many aspects of moral surveillance even predated the rise of puritanism during the English Reformations. Puritans differed from previous attempts at moral social control in their intensity, their willingness to disrupt both community harmony and popular culture, and their increased emphasis on policing morality and conduct. New England's churches made watchfulness a formal part of their religious culture by enshrining it in their covenants and in their practical faith. Formalized watchfulness attempted institutional containment of a force that worked chaotically in old England, in part by eliminating the church courts and moving the power of gossip and watchfulness into the churches themselves.¹⁷ In the established Church of England, discipline had been vested in ecclesiastical courts that were criticized by puritans for being too removed from the individual congregation. Early puritans in England exercised a more localized spiritual watch over one another in their voluntary associations and conventicles and began to suggest the necessity of a covenant to bind one another in a relationship of watchfulness. One enduring criticism of these "hot Protestants" was their willingness to intrude into others' private lives. These emphases on communal watch and covenanted relationships were not fully realized, however, while they still represented a persecuted minority.¹⁸

¹⁷ On gossip and slander in old England, see Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, especially 55-68; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapters 2 and 3. On English ecclesiastical courts, see Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 101-4; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, chapter 2; Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander*; Ingram, "Puritans and the Church Courts."

¹⁸ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1967), 89-90, 352-53, 381, 435; Timothy Scott McGinnis, *George Gifford and the Reformation of the Common Sort: Puritan*

New England's puritans brought with them a legacy of persecution that had required secrecy, the collective memory of years and decades in which their safety lay in evading surveillance. Now, the stability of their new venture in North America made surveillance an imperative of their own and they were able to take advantage of the tools available to those in authority. The secrecy they once used to evade punishment was now suspicious when used by others. Fundamentally, watchfulness was about rooting out danger. Privacy and secrecy were needed by those pursued as heretics or traitors when they practiced according to their consciences but were dangerous for those trying to keep good order. In New England, this once persecuted minority now harnessed watchfulness to prevent others from undermining their religious efforts whether through religious heterodoxy or through moral failings. No longer an embattled minority, New England's leaders needed to invent new enemies.¹⁹

By enshrining watchfulness as a religious obligation and by localizing discipline in individual congregations, New England's puritans attempted to constrain gossip while also making it an essential component of all aspects of church life that permeated beyond the boundaries of discipline to encompass all aspects of the visibility of "visible saints." The surveillance they had experienced in England was coercive and punitive, but now they aimed to implement a loving, supportive watchfulness that would help saints when they strayed while keeping the churches safe from threats. Talk helped them do this. They inhabited a world in which observation was ever-present and privacy was not a desired state, and these attitudes shaped their definition and practice of watchfulness. The wayward in their midst were lovingly

Priorities in Elizabethan Religious Life (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2004), 9–12, 101, 146–52; Seaver, *Wallington's World*, 170–73; E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 62–63; Foster, *The Long Argument*, 19, 63, 96, 135, 153–54; Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 159, 177.

¹⁹ Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 12–14; Winship, "Were There Any Puritans in New England?," 124–26.

corrected, the intransigent were scorned, and those who actively undermined them were fought. English settlers had a broader concern with policing their communities as well. Unworthy or unregenerate members posed a threat to not only the legitimacy of New England churches but the survival of the entire colony. The community had entered into a covenant with God that included an obligation to rein in ungodliness; failure could result in divine punishment. Policing the behavior of those around them was the only way to prevent the manifestation of God's displeasure in afflictions that would affect the entire community, which meant that every infraction must be addressed.²⁰ New England knew full well that their church government and the outcome of their experiment in puritan rule were both divine and transatlantic observation. Allowing ungodly behavior by their membership to continue unchecked would have been a blight on their argument that they constituted the "saving remnant" who had escaped the corruption of old England and offered an example for other true Christians to follow. Their "city on a hill" needed to be exceptional, to escape the fate of all other attempts at a godly society that had been corrupted and fallen into degeneracy. Imposing order and moral behavior began in their churches.

²⁰ Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 152; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 170–228; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 10. The fear of God's displeasure resulting from unchecked sin was frequently expressed in sermons that have come to be known as "jeremiads," which became prominent later in the century but expressed an idea that was much older. See Miller, *Colony to Province*, chapter 2; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Miller, *Seventeenth Century*, 464–65.

“brotherly love, and mutual subjection”²¹
Founding a Gathered Church

Watchfulness was embedded in New England’s churches from the moment of their founding and the process of gathering a new church firmly embedded their faith and devotional practice in social relationships with one another. These churches were gathered out of the world by members who voluntarily joined with each other through the instrument of the covenant for worship and edification. A church began when a suitable number of men—and only men—with unimpeachable reputations and beliefs about church order came together with the permission of the General Court “by common and joint consent, into one congregation,” which was called “a particular visible church.”²² Records from the founding of the Dedham church show the care that was taken to examine all the information that could be gathered about these founding members. The fathers of the church, they said, needed to “open their conditions” so that all had the opportunity to “judge of every one’s conditions or fitness for the work.” It was not enough for a man to declare his own state, however; others were implored to “inform the company of any sin or offences that any knew to be in any such person so to be tried.”²³ The Dedham church’s scrupulous investigation of the founding members caused delays while they resolved lingering doubts and concerns. One founder was deemed to have “rash carriage and speeches savoring of self-confidence”; another was “too much addicted to the world”; a third was

²¹ John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New-England. Or the Way of Churches Walking in Brotherly Equalitie, or Co-Ordination, without Subjection of One Church to Another* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1645), 8.

²² Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 1. On the process of founding churches, see also Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 4. For overviews of New England’s “covenant theology,” see Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1956), 39–40, 90–92; Perry Miller, *Sources for the New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, ed. James Hoopes (Williamsburg, VA: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1981), 435–36.

²³ Don Gleason Hill, ed., *The Record of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths, and Admissions to the Church and Dismissals Therefrom, Transcribed from the Church Records in the Town of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1638–1845* (Dedham, MA: Office of the Dedham Transcript, 1888), 5–6.

“innocent in respect of men” but there were concerned that he was “thought by the company to be so dark and unsatisfying in respect of the work of grace.” They waited on one of these cases until new arrivals from England provided testimonies on his behalf. Another “remaining stiff and unhumbled and not clearing himself to satisfaction” was not allowed to join and was replaced by another man who some of the founders had known in England and who also had “very good testimony of him from others.”²⁴ Their transatlantic journey had not wiped the slate clean. Reputation followed them across the ocean and this allowed the fathers of the church to ensure that the church was built on a solid spiritual and moral foundation.

After the founders drew up and signed a covenant, subsequent admissions to the now-gathered church could be formalized when new members also joined the contract. For both men and women, signing the covenant was the culmination of a sometimes-lengthy admissions process and represented a convergence of the individual covenant with God, the covenant of grace, and the social body by creating a group that would collectively seek its benefits for their community at large. The church was demarcated and defined by the covenanted relationship—only those who entered into it were members of the church and the church did not exist without it. This was a correction of one of the puritans’ complaints about the English church, which they thought had become increasingly corrupted in large part because it failed to provide an explicit covenanted relationship in individual congregations. Covenants were not a universal component of English puritan churches, but New England’s earliest congregations contracted together from the very beginning. Many early church records are no longer extant, but those covenants that remain show that explicit commitments to mutual watchfulness were nearly universal after the

²⁴ Hill, 6–7. On Dedham’s founding, see Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years : Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736*, Enlarged edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), chap. 2; Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112–15.

first decade of settlement.²⁵ The very brief covenants drawn up at the founding of Salem, Boston, and Charleston churches did not mention watchfulness but these were soon supplanted by more elaborate declarations. By 1636 Salem had enlarged their covenant to include a promise to “walk with our brethren and sisters in this congregation with all watchfulness and tenderness, avoiding all jealousies, suspicions, backbitings, censurings, provokings, [and] secret risings of spite against them.”²⁶ From that point on, all extant covenants included language reminding members of their duty to watch over each other.²⁷ This meant that church members were also implicitly agreeing to be watched, to be observed by their fellow visible saints. In a face-to-face society of relatively small villages, church members were likely already inured to the idea of being continually observed, but covenants gave sanction to this tendency, turning curiosity into moral and spiritual imperative.

²⁵ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 91; Stout, *New England Soul*, 17–18; James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15; William E. Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants* (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1917), 10; Williston Walker, ed., *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1991), 93–131, 210; Miller, *Seventeenth Century*, 435. On the expansion of covenants over time, see Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints*, 21–22.

²⁶ Richard D. Pierce, ed., *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 39, Collections (Boston: The Society, 1961); J. F. Hunnewell, ed., *Records of the First Church in Charlestown, 1632–1789* (Boston: D. Clapp and Son, 1880), 7; Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 116–17; Richard D. Pierce, ed., *The Records of the First Church in Salem Massachusetts, 1629–1736* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1974), 3–4.

²⁷ See, for example, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., “Records of the Salem-Village Church from November 1689 to October 1696, as Kept by the Reverend Samuel Parris,” in *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1972), 269; William P. Upham, ed., *Records of the First Church in Beverly, Massachusetts, 1667–1772* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1905), 6; Boston, Second Church, Covenant (1650), Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA; Second Church (Boston, Mass.) Records, 1650–1970, Ms. N-2037, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA; Hamilton Andrews Hill, *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669–1884*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890), 127, 240; Stephen Paschall Sharples, ed., *Records of the Church of Christ at Cambridge in New England, 1632–1830* (Boston: Eben Putnam, 1906), 76–77; *Records of the First Church at Dorchester in New England, 1636–1734* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1891), 2; First Church of Christ (Marblehead, Mass.) Records, RG5043, New England Hidden Histories, The Congregational Library and Archive, Boston, MA; *Milton Church Records, 1681–1754*, Facsimiles (Milton, MA: Milton Historical Society, 1916); Arthur Lord, ed., *Plymouth Church Records, 1620–1859*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 22, (Boston: The Society, 1920), 148; James F. Cooper and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., “Reading Church Records, 1648–1769,” in *The Colonial Church Records of the First Church of Reading (Wakefield) and the First Church of Rumney Marsh (Revere)* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2006), 122–23.

Watchfulness was part of a broader commitment to hold each other to the standards set by Scripture, supplementing the need for self-watchfulness, encouraging other members in sanctified behavior, and reining in members who strayed (as even saints inevitably would). Consenting to join together as a congregation included a promise to “cleave one to another in brotherly love, and mutual subjection.”²⁸ These covenants were not standardized but generally included pledges to “to submit themselves one unto another, in all the ordinances of Christ, to mutual edification, and comfort, to watch over, and support one another.”²⁹ While admissions often seemed to focus on the candidate’s facility with self-scrutiny, and many studies of New England puritanism have followed suit, the covenants show that this was a social faith cemented by mutual agreement to watch over one another. They were also a recognition that church members held “mutual power one over another,” that they knew each other sufficiently well to make judgments about behavior and “conversation,” and that they voluntarily subjected themselves to the judgments of others within the same covenant obligations. These obligations and responsibilities were presented as a positive good, an active performance of their Christian duties to each other and their desire to see others in their church “grow up to a perfect man in Christ Jesus.”³⁰

Watchfulness helped puritan churches satisfy the imperative that the “visible church” approximate the invisible church as closely as possible. Predestination did not invalidate the importance of good behavior. Assurance, or the growing knowledge of one’s salvation, was accompanied by sanctification, “the gradual improvement of a man’s behavior in obedience to God.” Good behavior was part of what made sainthood “visible” and they searched for this

²⁸ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 8.

²⁹ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 2. See also Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 2, 4.

³⁰ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 8, 63; Walker, “Cambridge Platform,” 207–8.

evidence both in themselves and in each other to ensure that the church was as uncorrupted as possible. New Englanders were careful to distinguish this from a covenant of works: Salvation could not come from good behavior, but good behavior would follow on justification and assurance. Watchfulness enabled the church to police their members and potentially identify deliberate or unwitting “hypocrites” in their midst. Even saints would stray, and conversion was a gradual process that occurred over the course of a lifetime, and saints’ grace-given impulses to behave in godly ways were always in competition with their baser, “natural” instincts. Watchfulness provided opportunities to correct wayward members and thereby help “improve” them as they searched for signs of sanctification and justification. Self-watch was vital to the project of regeneration but the aid provided by being watched by others provided a check on potential self-delusion. This explains why church members would voluntarily submit to formal, ongoing surveillance: it provided social assistance to what could otherwise be seen as an essentially solitary (and fallible) effort.³¹

Signing the covenant was the final stage in a lengthy admission process that began in private with the elders and ended with a public declaration of the covenant. Public demonstration of membership was reasserted every Sabbath day through seating in the meetinghouse according to status and reenacted during the monthly performance of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but it was also presented daily as members watched and were watched by their fellows for signs of sanctification or transgression. Through the process of

³¹ Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 2–4, 15, 67, 70, 103; Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, chapter 6 and pages 94, 147, 165-166; Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*; Michael McGiffert, ed., *God’s Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 16–18; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 6. The Antinomians rejected this view of justification, believing instead in a “vision of spontaneous virtue.” Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 205. The doctrine of justification prevented belief in a covenant of grace from leading to immorality, which was a danger because, as Perry Miller noted, “humanity could see less and less reason for caring about moral adornments if its spiritual nuptials were arranged before the courtship had begun.” Miller, *Seventeenth Century*, 368.

admission and the practice of being a church member, church membership status was literally made visible to the community, not only to other church members but also to those outside the covenant who attended sermons and lectures in the meetinghouse.

“whether the sin may not be told”³²

Public and Private Offences in the Admission of Sarah Fiske

Those who sought membership were required to satisfy both themselves and church members that they were among the elect. This was achieved through successive examinations that moved from personal introspection to private discussions to public investigations and performance of narratives recounting the journey to faith. Through this process a saint was made “visible,” both in the sense of being acknowledged by the church to have received a work of grace and likely to be an invisible saint, and also in the sense of being presented to the public for evaluation and judgment as the church assessed their fitness in knowledge, conversation, and evidence of grace. The saints presented themselves to the church through personal relations given before the congregation, while those acquainted with the person provided testimonies about their behavior that resulted from socially sanctioned surveillance. These practices reveal the extent to which watchfulness was an integral way of policing the boundaries of the church and show the importance of keeping watch on those who were not yet members in case they later decided to seek the covenant. The process of admission also shows that New England’s churches made careful distinctions between public and private as a way of trying to contain and discipline information that could negatively affect a prospective or current member’s reputation.

³² Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord 1698* (Hartford, CT: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853), 2:258.

Within the first two decades of settlement, the ideal process of admitting new members to the covenant had been regularized throughout Massachusetts, though there were some variations among congregations.³³ After receiving an experience of “work of grace upon their souls,” the potential member would approach the elders in a private meeting to relate this experience and to be tested on knowledge of church doctrine. The elders were then to “make trial” of the prospective member’s “godly conversation amongst men” to ensure that their daily behavior and speech evinced their status as part of the elect. This trial entrusted each elder to “enquire diligently, and carefully to inform himself, touching the uprightness of the persons carriage and conversation from the testimony of others, who know him intimately, and will in reason deal nakedly and sincerely therein.”³⁴ Prospective members needed to have already demonstrated behavior appropriate to a visible saint prior to becoming one, and the evidence was provided by those who had observed them behaving in a sanctified way before they themselves had realized it. Absence of scandal or bad behavior was insufficient—prospective members also needed to have positively demonstrated godly behavior.

If the elders were satisfied by their private investigations, they instructed the church members to conduct an expanded inquiry. The prospective member was “propounded” to the church, who were enjoined to investigate the person’s life and behavior and “if they shall hear of any just exceptions against them, to give notice of it to one of the elders.”³⁵ The members were to take into consideration their own experiences with the person as well as anything they might have heard from others so that they would be “fully informed and satisfied, touching the

³³ Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 88–93.

³⁴ Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline. Wherein, the Way of the Churches of New-England Is Warranted out of the Word* (London: A.M. for John Bellamy, 1648), pt. iii, pp. 4–5; Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 54; Hooker, *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, pt. 3, p. 4.

³⁵ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 54.

unblamableness of their conversation.”³⁶ Members had a responsibility not only to report their own experience with the prospective member but also to seek out information from others to get a full picture of their life and conversation including both positive and negative evidence. Not all evidence was presented in a public forum, however. Wenham church had specifically determined that “the things that be private be kept private” by proceeding first in a private meeting before a public propounding.³⁷ Any private offences that were brought to the elders’ attention would be dealt with privately and public offences were brought before the church publicly.³⁸ After this public trial, the church members then voted with a show of hands or through assent by silence; if any objected, the fault was “cleared and removed before any further proceedings.”³⁹

Rather than encouraging prurient gossip, New England’s churches made careful distinctions between what was public information and what was private. Church admissions and disciplinary procedures were not meant to spread information or destroy reputations—people who heard damaging information about members or prospective members were supposed to bring that information to the minister and elders and only those transgressions that were already widely known, or particularly intransigent offenders, had their sins aired before the whole church and congregation. Churches sought to prevent their admissions and disciplinary processes from

³⁶ Hooker, *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, pt. iii, pp. 4–5.

³⁷ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 17.

³⁸ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 4–5. On definitions of public and private, see Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 20–24, 46, 378–86, 388–89, 402–3; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*.

³⁹ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 54–55; Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 88–93; Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 4–11; Richard Mather, *Church-Government and Church-Covenant Discussed. In an Answer of the Elders in the Severall Churches in New-England To Two and Thirty Questions, Sent over to Them by Divers Ministers in England, to Declare Their Judgments Therein* (London: R.O. and G.D. for Benjamin Allen, 1643), 23–24.

spreading information that was private. By disciplining information, New England's leaders aimed to maintain order and contain possible disruptions from unbridled information.

One way that puritans disciplined information was by making careful distinctions between public and private speech. Rather than a simple binary, these categories shifted depending on who was speaking, what they were speaking about, who heard their speech, and the consequences of what they said. Two people could have a private conversation if there were no witnesses and if the topic did not have wider implications for the social order, but that same conversation could be public if one of them told someone else who told someone else until it became "common fame." Similarly, the churches distinguished between public and private meetings. Public meetings might include both church members and the congregation, or might include all church members but not non-members. Private meetings might be those that included only church members, or those that included a small number of members. When "private" was used to describe the setting of a confession or a conflict resolution in the church, a more legible term today might be "closed."

Churches debated whether the examination of prospective members should be done in a setting that included the entire congregation, including non-members, or whether only the church should be present. Wenham Church concluded that it was "more comely and honorable" for membership to be addressed without the presence of non-members. They also decided that the initial propounding for membership should be done privately for the "preserving of the good name of the party."⁴⁰ While the process was meant to be thorough and searching, John Cotton warned that churches should not be too harsh in their judgments of prospective members, warning that "we had rather 99 hypocrites should perish through presumption, then one humble

⁴⁰ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 5, 17.

soul belonging to Christ, should sink under discouragement or despair.”⁴¹ This defense of their restrictive admission practices, written for an English audience critical of nonconformity, does not seem to have been reflected in most churches’ approaches. History had shown these reformers that “error and corruptions may creep and have crept into the most famous churches.”⁴² Dedham declared that the only way to prevent unworthy communicants was to prevent “one man or woman secretly vile, which the church hath not used all means to discover,” from bringing down the entire body.⁴³ In practice, the scrutiny that accompanied the admission process may have been a factor that deterred some New England residents from seeking full church membership, an argument supported by the number of churches that allowed potential communicants to submit their narratives privately as the century progressed.⁴⁴ Theoretically, no one was immune from the investigatory aspect of the membership process, regardless of status. It is likely, however, that the poor, new arrivals, and those with unsavory reputations received more scrutiny than well-known neighbors and those higher on the social hierarchy.

The protracted admission process of Sarah Fiske to the Wenham church in the mid-1640s illustrated how gossip and reputation influenced all stages of the process. This well-documented case shows how private disputes entered into public view during the admission process and how watchfulness and memory extended over both time and geographic space. Throughout the process, the church tried to discipline gossip to protect the reputation of a current member that was threatened during their investigations of a prospective member. Their final judgment rested on whether Fiske had behaved inappropriately toward her husband Phineas by publicizing a

⁴¹ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 58.

⁴² Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 143.

⁴³ Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened & Applied* (London: J. Hayes for John Rothwell, 1660), pt. ii, p. 197.

⁴⁴ Dunn, “Saints and Sisters,” 593.

disagreement between them.⁴⁵ Her failure to appropriately distinguish between public and private disputes, and particularly her failure to keep criticisms of her husband out of the public eye, were her most egregious fault. Because her accusations were made publicly, the issue that the church needed to resolve was not a marital dispute but damage to her husband's reputation, and they did that by very publicly working to secure her repentance.⁴⁶ Disagreements between a husband and a wife were of public concern if those disputes threatened to unfairly damage his reputation and if her accusations were proved true he might be subject to discipline for his behavior.

After Sarah Fiske sought membership and had been examined by the elders, who apparently found no reason for concern, she was propounded to the church who were encouraged to provide any information they had for or against her admission, "private offenses excepted." Objections were raised about public criticisms she had made about her husband's treatment of her. Making accusations against her husband in public drew what was otherwise a marital dispute into the community's purview and threatened public order. The primary objection made to her membership was that she had carried herself inappropriately toward her husband by "accounting him an enemy and exclaiming against him commonly and saying he loved another woman better than his wife." Sarah's defense was that she "only spake of the thing to one or two to hear their private judgment, whom she thought would have been private."⁴⁷ She sought advice and counsel from people she expected to keep the information to themselves, she claimed, but

⁴⁵ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxxv. Round has speculated that the scrutiny Mrs. Fiske received was due in part to her past as a servant, and that "marginal economic and social positions were inextricably bound up in their 'conversation.'" Phillip H. Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed: Transatlantic Civil Discourse and New England Cultural Production, 1620–1660* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 79–80.

⁴⁶ For a different interpretation of Sarah Fiske's membership trial, see Cohen, *God's Caress*, 154–56.

⁴⁷ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 22, 28.

they instead spread her words to the wider community and therefore made her private conversation into a public issue that threatened her ability to become a church member and her husband's reputation as a godly family governor.

The church began investigations into the "scandals divulged upon" Phineas by his wife. The issue was now not only her admission to the church but also their need to clear her husband's name. Phineas Fiske was a church member and acting on his wife's membership without first determining the truth about what she was claimed to have said would amount to implicitly confirming her accusations against him. Those "within and without the church" would hear the reports and assume he was guilty. After all, they said, "all will be ready to say, where there is so much smoke there is some fire." These "rumors and reports," and their effect on Phineas Fiske's reputation in the church and the wider community, were the focus of the church's investigation into the accusations made by his wife that were reported during her admission proceedings. Phineas tried to redefine the scope of the dispute and move it back into the private realm by arguing that "it lies between their two," but the church took seriously the dangers of legitimating "scandals divulged upon a brother."⁴⁸ They were not acting on his request but out of their own needs. Sarah may have spoken privately to her friends about a private matter but those people made the information public and therefore it was no longer only between husband and wife.

Information that became public during admission proceedings had the potential to affect the reputations not only of those seeking membership, but also their friends and neighbors who were touched by testimony about them. While these accusations may have begun as rumors, the church took seriously its obligation to verify the reports and the process through which they

⁴⁸ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 25–27.

investigated converted gossip into confirmed public knowledge. Inquiries into the Fiskes legitimated gossip about the couple at the same time that church leaders tried to rein it in by insisting that objections should be made to them directly rather than talking about it amongst themselves, “one brother to another.”⁴⁹ If accusations were public, the exoneration must be too. The proceedings against the Fiskes also showed, however, ways in which the church went about determining whose words to believe and whose to discount and seemed to value Phineas’s reputation over his wife’s.

Despite the immediacy with which the tale was reported, this dispute between the Fiskes was not actually recent but had in fact taken place while the couple still lived in Salem prior to their move to Wenham. The Salem church had cleared her of it when she sought membership there and Wenham received information to this effect from the Salem church in a letter.⁵⁰ Sarah had not proceeded to full membership in Salem after the disputes over her behavior had been resolved there, but if she had that might have eased her path to membership in Wenham. A full church member who sought to leave one congregation and join another needed to be formally “dismissed” from the covenant. This served the purposes of verifying that the member’s reason for leaving was legitimate, ensuring her fitness to join a different church, and allowing the church being left to verify the member would be joining a godly congregation elsewhere and not “some corrupt assembly where he may be destroyed.”⁵¹ A formal dismissal transferred responsibility for “watch and care” to the member’s new church, therefore extending watchfulness over geographic space.⁵² There were differing opinions about whether a dismissed

⁴⁹ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxxv, 23–26.

⁵⁰ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 27; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 79.

⁵¹ John Davenport, *An Answer of the Elders of the Severall Churches in New-England unto Nine Positions* (London: T. P. and M. S. for Benjamin Allen, 1643), 74–75; Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 103–5.

⁵² Hill, *History of the Old South*, 1:181.

member was required to complete the admission process anew when they sought to join a different church. The Wenham church worried that “such letters may be counterfeited and the church ordinances both abused and profaned” if the person was not known personally by some members of the congregation, but they agreed to admit someone who lacked letters with “a verbal testimony of one or more of the church upon some knowledge of them.”⁵³ If a member is under the watch of the whole church, Fiske said, then “the whole church is likewise led to see and provide that some be watched over in the other church.”⁵⁴ If Sarah Fiske had been a church member before arriving in Wenham, she might only have needed to provide evidence of it and the previous issues with her husband would have been assumed to be resolved.

As things stood, however, Sarah’s path to membership was not yet clear. Wenham church also sought information from a witness in Watertown, Phineas’s cousin who Sarah said had tried to intervene in their disputes. Sarah had claimed that Phineas showed “cruelty and bitterness in his carriage to her” and said when his cousin Martha Underwood approached Phineas about his “harshness” toward Sarah, Phineas said “he would break her heart.” The church queried Underwood, and several months later they received a letter from Watertown in which she said that she “never did see anything that I did apprehend to be a miscarriage towards his wife from him” but that Sarah Fiske had provoked Phineas during an argument. Underwood admitted that she told Phineas “he should do well if he did break her of her will in that particular.”⁵⁵ The witness Sarah hoped would support her had in fact given evidence that confirmed the church’s suspicions about her. This evidence helped restore Phineas’s reputation as a husband and stretched the network of communication and gossip about the Fiskes’ marriage

⁵³ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 18.

⁵⁴ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 20–21.

⁵⁵ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 28–29.

beyond Wenham and Salem to Watertown. The church held a meeting to address Goody Fiske's case and determined that evidence "was judged to clear our brother from the imputation cast on him by his wife."⁵⁶

After the Wenham church's investigations cleared Phineas of Sarah's charges to their satisfaction, they sought to bring the full force of informal surveillance and watchfulness to bear on her. Everyone in the community was encouraged to confront her with her mistake whenever possible while also demonstrating correct behavior as a way of bringing her to awareness and repentance.⁵⁷ Church members were encouraged to "endeavor as opportunity serve to convince her in the particulars" and that "everyone take meet season to tell her of it plainly." They should also pray for her and "walk exemplarily before her." She particularly needed to acknowledge that she did "evil" in "publishing what she should have concealed (had this been true) to the defaming of her husband." She lied, but even if she had told the truth she should not have disparaged her husband to another person. Her mistake was not only in publicizing her private affairs but also that she had done so, they thought, "in way of extenuating her own evil" and she continued to justify herself even after the church had addressed her accusations. That she had made such a case in her relation to the church was an "aggravation of her sin."⁵⁸

All this public and private consultation about her sin, and the insistence that church members confront and cajole her about the unresolved charges, was being conducted before she had even become a church member. Despite the pressure put on her by the community, the months dragged on and repeated private visits by the elders failed to find sufficient demonstration of repentance for her transgressions. Finally, Sarah Fiske asked to speak before a

⁵⁶ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 32.

⁵⁷ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxxi.

⁵⁸ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 32.

church meeting where she “acknowledged she did evil in these particulars whereas she should have kept secret.” She acknowledged the error, then, not only in speaking out against her husband but specifically in not keeping their disputes private. In broadcasting them to her friends and to the church and damaging his reputation, she erred as a wife and as a potential saint. The church agreed to put her forward for membership but only after she had confessed her failings publicly to the congregation as a whole. She did so and was finally admitted nearly a year after the church first began to debate her case.⁵⁹

Most church admissions were much less protracted than what Sarah Fiske experienced. Though never perfunctory, the process could be completed in a matter of weeks after the prospective member’s first approach to the elders if there were no objections or doubts about the person’s fitness. In this case, however, Sarah’s wayward talk about her husband brought a marital dispute into public view and revealed the church’s willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure their members were free from lingering errors. Over the course of a year, men and women in three towns and two different congregations had been called upon to report their observations of Sarah’s behavior and conversation. This was a case that hinged on words spoken between husband and wife, between a woman and her confidants, among those confidants and their friends, between cousins, and among the church members themselves. Speech, not only its content but its context, was as important to Sarah Fiske’s membership case as her knowledge of the Word.

⁵⁹ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 32–35, 40–47.

“make their faith and holiness visible”⁶⁰

Testimonies and Personal Relations

In the admission proceedings for Sarah Fiske, the Wenham church carefully considered her past speech and sought information from those who could verify her words. Many churches emphasized the need for personal testimonies of prospective members’ conversation and behavior even if they had to wait for people or letters to arrive from across the ocean.⁶¹ This scrupulous inspection of a prospective member’s fitness for membership was necessary in a church structure that vested much of the power of church government in the hands of laypeople. As the population grew through immigration and fewer newcomers arrived as part of a congregation that migrated *en masse*, they were “strangers to one another before, meeting from many parts” and thus their fellow saints needed an admissions process that allowed them to be “well acquainted with the hearts and states of one another.”⁶² The process used to evaluate prospective members relied on not only the applicant’s own assessment of their spiritual condition or demonstration of grace and knowledge, but also on testimonies of their “good carriage” from those who knew them well and had had the opportunity to observe them when they were not under formal surveillance. The formal admissions process allowed them in some way to replicate the familiarity they might have had with friends or neighbors prior to migration. In this way, New England’s puritans used reputation and correspondence networks to recreate the functions of a face-to-face society across distance.

During the public admission process, the lives and “conversations” of prospective members were made public to those who might not have personally known them. Church

⁶⁰ Hill, *Dedham Church Records*, 4.

⁶¹ Hill, *Dedham Church Records*, 14.

⁶² Hill, *Dedham Church Records*, 3.

members were given the opportunity to question the aspiring member and to offer testimony “either according to their own knowledge of him, or according to the credible reports or letters which they have received concerning him.”⁶³ This aspect of the membership ritual shows that New Englanders were being watched before they were church members and that there was widespread attention to others behavior even in the absence of this religious imperative. Churches were willing to seek or receive information from afar about prospective members and reports were solicited or at least received from outside the local community. New England’s community of the godly was tied together across geographic distance by correspondence that shared information about people’s behavior and reputations, thereby extending the surveillance of watchfulness outside the local context.⁶⁴

The written word, whether scribal or print, had been vital to the culture of English Protestant communities since the first break with Rome under Henry VIII. Vernacular Bibles, printed or written sermons, and didactic works such as psalms and prescriptive literature aided the pious in living godly lives while also creating a community of believers across geographic space. Even those who were not literate could participate in this culture by having works read aloud to them, but the Protestant emphasis on the written word meant that reading literacy was encouraged and increased in all social strata. This made oral and literate culture in some ways inseparable and blurred distinctions between words that were heard and words that were read.

⁶³ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 6–7; Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 54–55.

⁶⁴ On clerical communication channels, see Bremer, *Congregational Communion*; McIntyre, ““Heare It So Variousy Reported””; Francis J. Bremer, “Increase Mather’s Friends: The Trans-Atlantic Congregational Network of the Seventeenth Century,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 94 (1984): 59–96; Searle, “Transatlantic Puritan Republic of Letters.” There are not, as yet, any thorough studies of lay communication networks in New England. On the mechanics of communication across distance in New England, both of which emphasize Native American involvement, see Katherine Grandjean, *American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Matt Cohen, *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

David Hall has noted that the practice of taking notes during sermons further blurred the distinction between media because words spoken from the pulpit were written down and then later read aloud in households. After migrating across the ocean, puritan ministers in New England were able to understand themselves as part of a broader community in part because of the epistolary networks they maintained with their fellows in old England. The letters exchanged between the Wenham church and Salem church, and between Wenham's elders and Phineas's cousin, were therefore part of a larger phenomenon in which puritans constructed community in part through written correspondence.⁶⁵

Because admission to church membership began in private meetings, elders had a chance to halt the process before a vote was put before the church and most testimony in opposition to the candidate had already been addressed before the wider membership was consulted. Testimony received before the church was therefore usually supportive, recounting the candidate's godly conversation and reputation for regenerate behavior. The extent and detail of these testimonies is difficult to reconstruct because recordkeepers usually only noted "testimony given of their conversation" or that "no exception came in against them."⁶⁶ Records occasionally include a note on the sources of positive testimonies, typically for members who were not previously well-known to the church or came from questionable backgrounds. Mrs. Baldwin, a "French gentlewoman" from the Isle of Jersey, applied for membership to the Salem church and

⁶⁵ This description of Protestant reading and writing practices is drawn from David D. Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), chap. 1 and 2; David D. Hall, "Readers and Writers in Early New England," in *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 117–51; Johanna Harris, "'But I Thinke and Beleeve': Lady Brilliana Harley's Puritanism in Epistolary Community," in *The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558–1680*, ed. Johanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 108–21; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*; Matthew P. Brown, *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1–35.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 91, 96, 97, 152.

“brought with her considerable testimonials from sundry of the French ministers concerning her piety and good conversation where she had lived” and “also a testimony given of her good conversation by many of the sisters of the church.”⁶⁷ Thomas Morse had been initially rejected by the Dedham church but was admitted after “further trial of his carriage” and “some testimony of the godly that knew him in England.”⁶⁸ Mrs. Greene gave only a perfunctory narrative when she sought membership in the Cambridge church but was admitted because “testimonies carried it.”⁶⁹ The recitation of these testimonies created or reinforced a prospective member’s reputation for godly behavior and provided a foundation for their new identity as a visible saint.

Church admissions were based on evidence of individual character and behavior but some potential church members also had to overcome assumptions based on the social category to which they belonged. In 1659 messengers from several churches went to Roxbury “for to hear the Indians make a relation, of the work of God upon their soul.” After their narratives were offered and translated into English by John Eliot, there were “many questions put to the Indians in point of knowledge to the great rejoicing of the hearers.”⁷⁰ While questioning prospective members on points of doctrine was common practice, the “great rejoicing” that accompanied the spectacle was unusual and likely the result of assumptions about Indians’ spiritual capacity that led these clergy and elders to hold them to a higher standard while also using them as an edifying example. The same seems to have been true for a black servant or slave woman who sought membership in the Salem church in 1698. The minister’s record of Hanna’s admission went beyond his usual vague note that the prospective member had been examined and instead

⁶⁷ Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 145.

⁶⁸ Hill, *Dedham Church Records*, 23.

⁶⁹ George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley, eds., *Thomas Shepard’s Confessions*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 58, Collections (Boston: The Society, 1981), 23, 117–18.

⁷⁰ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 30.

specified that she “answered according to Mr. Cotton’s Catechise very exactly” and that “she had also the testimony of diverse of the church for a Christian conversation.” Specific knowledge of a particular catechism was proof that Hanna’s faith was being guided by the proper use of text, a performance of knowledge required of a black servant woman but not deemed important enough to be recorded for others. Like all candidates for church membership, she was not only expected to perform her visible sainthood in the moment of admission but also was to have performed it in the months and years before—and to have performed it with a visibility that allowed others to observe and subsequently testify to it.⁷¹

While most testimony in opposition to a potential member seems to have been received during the private portion of the process, some negative testimony about prospective members was heard in public. In these cases, unresolved offences and transgressions were laid before members of the church and congregants who might otherwise not have known about them. When Ebenezer Lyons was propounded to the Dorchester church, several of the brethren objected based on having “taken some offence for words spoken by him.” He confessed and the church voted to delay his admission so they could continue to watch him and evaluate his behavior.⁷² Goody Shipley’s admission to the Wenham church was delayed while the church debated whether “the uncleanness and uncivility of her children might be to her default.”⁷³ When Matthew Edwards stood propounded to the Reading church, “testimony came in against him to charge him with the guilt of a scandal” but he was admitted after he made a confession to his accusers privately and they testified to their satisfaction before the church.⁷⁴ In these cases,

⁷¹ Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 181.

⁷² *Dorchester First Church Records*, 91.

⁷³ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 61.

⁷⁴ Cooper and Minkema, “Reading Church Records,” 76.

the records show that objections were made but do not reveal the substance of those accusations that prevented admission. These lacunae not only show that there is much we can never know about the function of oral information transmission in the maintenance of church culture, but also that church record keepers were likely responding to concerns about reputation and the perpetuation of gossip about incidents that were considered closed after the church received satisfaction. It is also quite possible that churches kept separate records of specific testimonies that have since been either deliberately or accidentally lost.⁷⁵

Candidates' reputations were solidified during the admission process by collecting testimonies and sharing information with those who had not had an opportunity to personally observe the prospective member and brought up information from the past that might otherwise have been unknown. This would likely have been a small to vanishing number in most communities because of the face-to-face nature of village life, but for newcomers and in larger towns like Boston where many were not already acquainted, these steps assured that by the time someone became a church member she or he would be well known to all other members and to the congregation outside the covenant. The prospective member's reputation was fundamental evidence but churches also shaped reputation by curating the admission process and choosing which information to make public.⁷⁶ Gathering and publicizing information about individuals was not understood as gossip, however, because it was seen as essential evidence in service of a public good and the churches were at pains to make sure the process was fair. Testimonies

⁷⁵ For a deliberate case, see Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, xxiii–xxiv. Many records note that papers were presented that cannot be found in remaining collections. See, for example, Boston Second Church Records, vol. 3, p. 22; Boston Second Church Records, vol. 8, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Robert Pope argued that the stages of the admission process preserved reputations by preventing the airing of private grievances in a public setting, and that “only in notorious scandals did the church expect the candidate to confess his sin before all the inhabitants.” Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xvi.

during the admission process show that the spiritual journey preceding assurance and justification was, despite its fundamental inwardness, also a social process.⁷⁷

After any objections had been cleared, prospective members were called before the church to make a “confession of his sins, and profession of his faith,” including a narrative of the work of God on his or her soul.⁷⁸ Extant admission relations demonstrate recognition that conversion had a social component. Conversations with godly friends and neighbors, listening to sermons, and reading godly books helped bring people to assurance, while interactions with ungodly people tested sanctification. The inward journey was spurred by these conversations with others, including not only ministers and elders but also family members, neighbors, and friends. In their relations, New England puritans situated themselves in a social space where speech and conversation formed a cornerstone of their religious culture and in which religious ideas were embedded in their interactions with one another. Relations were delivered publicly before the church, either by the prospective member or by a minister who read a written narrative. Puritans prohibited women from speaking in church if their speech could be construed as teaching men or exercising authority, but they were allowed to speak under questioning. In most churches this meant that women’s narratives were given to the minister or elders in private

⁷⁷ While the term “conversion narrative” has become commonplace, Francis Bremer notes that this implies a suddenness to the conversion process that is at odds with puritan belief, and at the time they were more commonly called “relations.” Professions, meanwhile, were statements of doctrine that demonstrated knowledge rather than faith. Bremer, “‘To Tell What God Hath Done for Thy Soul’: Puritan Spiritual Testimonies as Admission Tests and Means of Edification,” 640–41. I will use the terms “relation” and “narrative” interchangeably but dispense with the term “conversion” to describe them.

⁷⁸ Cotton, *Way of the Churches*, 54–55. For the historiographical debate about how widespread this practice was in New England, see Michael P. Winship, “Reconsiderations: An Exchange: Did John Davenport’s Church Require Conversion Narratives for Church Admission? A Challenge,” *New England Quarterly* 87 (2014): 132–39; Francis J. Bremer, “‘To Tell What God Hath Done for Thy Soul’: Puritan Spiritual Testimonies as Admission Tests and Means of Edification,” *New England Quarterly* 87 (2014): 625–65; Francis Bremer, “Did John Davenport’s Church Require Conversion Narratives for Church Admission? A Response,” *New England Quarterly* 87 (March 2016): 140–46. There does not seem to be any dispute, however, that churches with closed communion required some evidence of the prospective member’s fitness and that evidence was obtained through testimony and narratives presented in some form.

and then read to the church by one of these men rather than being delivered personally.⁷⁹ Private confessions were allowed when the prospective member “through excessive fear, or other infirmity, be unable to make their personal relation of their spiritual estate in public” which would have allowed men to also have their narratives read for them, although that seems to have been rare until the end of the century.⁸⁰

Despite the prohibition on women’s speech in the meetinghouse, women were not expected to be silent about spiritual matters and in particular about their own spiritual state in their daily lives. In fact, many noted that the period preceding their experience of grace was marked by the inability to speak to others, a social loneliness born out of spiritual emptiness. Mary Sparrowhawk worried about her spiritual state but was afraid to speak to anyone about it. After hearing a sermon about the dangers of “keeping her condition close” she “resolved to make her condition known” and discussed her concerns with a neighbor. Hannah Brewer and Richard Cutter also reported resistance to speaking to others about their condition, and Jane Palfrey and Ann Errington were even afraid to discuss their condition with their husbands. A reluctance to speak about spiritual concerns could cause a church to hesitate; the wife of William Fiske was “usually observed to be silent from speaking of heavenly matters and spiritual matters” but she was admitted after those who knew her testified that “she was observed to be of few words in company in any case.” This woman’s silence was interpreted as a lack of faith or sincerity and the defense that she was usually quiet around others shows that this was not typical or idealized behavior for women in this community.⁸¹ Spiritual narratives, which were presented in public

⁷⁹ John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes a Gospel-Ordinance* (London: M. S. for Hannah Allen and John Rothwell, 1647), 42–43; Hooker, *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, part III: 6.

⁸⁰ “A Platform of Church Discipline, 1648,” 222–223; Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 75.

⁸¹ Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 137; Selement and Woolley, *Shepard’s Confessions*, 66–67, 149, 151, 179, 185; Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 24. On the importance of speech in the conversion process, see

following the extensive private and semi-private stages of the process, highlighted the importance of self-watch in the regeneration process and complimented the community watchfulness inherent in testimonies. They made public the relationships that shaped a person's social circle and spiritual journey while also publicizing to those who did not know them the failings and faltering that preceded their sanctification.

The narrative served two social purposes: first, prospective church members demonstrated knowledge and sufficient self-examination, proving that they were qualified to join the community of saints; and second, listeners gained knowledge of the prospective member even if their paths had not crossed significantly before. Relations as recorded did not often include confessions of specific sins and failings but they likely needed to conform to what others knew and prospective members would be questioned if they did not include some reference to events or behaviors of which others were aware. As delivered, they might have included more specific confessions or references that were not recorded by ministers. It is possible that the records were meant to be “exemplary rather than evidentiary” or that ministers were protecting their members’ future reputations.⁸² It is also possible that specific details were unnecessary in a face-to-face culture and at the end of a long trial for membership, during which both public testimony and private discussion would have made many hearers familiar with the prospective member’s past prior to the final public relation.⁸³ Listeners may have understood and been

Ann Kibbey, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice, and Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 2, especially pp. 6–9.

⁸² Quote from Mary Rhinelander McCarl, “Thomas Shepard’s Record of Relations of Religious Experience, 1648–1649,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991): 433. See also Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 146–48.

⁸³ McGiffert has drawn attention to the ways that questioning revealed that hearers knew much more about the prospective member’s past than was explicitly revealed in the narratives. McGiffert, *God’s Plot*, 139.

satisfied by oblique references to those sins without needing the kind of explicit confession that would have publicized private lapses, or incriminated others, to the rest of the community.

Over time, more and more churches allowed prospective members to have their narratives read aloud for them by the minister rather than delivering it themselves and eventually some debated whether the church body should be allowed to hear the narrative at all. Concerns about reputation seem to have been at least partially in play when churches debated whether narratives and testimonies should be given before the church members only or in the presence of the entire congregation. Debates over whether candidates should give their testimony of conversion in public or private continued through the end of the century, and Increase Mather pointed to gossip as a reason that some may have wished to keep their narratives away from the public stage. Reluctance to deliver the narrative personally did not reduce exposure and Mather argued that some details may need to be kept from the public ear.⁸⁴ Among the reasons he gave for allowing men to give private narratives was the possibility that “the occasion of a man’s conversion may have been something not fit to be publicly related.” It may be, Mather argued, that “some secret sin which himself has been guilty of, may have so wounded his conscience as to occasion his true repentance for all his other sins.” But this, Mather said, “he ought not to tell the world of.”⁸⁵ The narrative was an occasion for edification and a way of demonstrating grace, but it was not meant to be a time for public humiliation or exposure. Much like testimonies were differentiated between public and private concerns, by the end of the century Mather argued that the details of one’s conversion should be protected in some circumstances.

⁸⁴ Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 4–8. On the gendering of public relations, see Cohen, *God’s Caress*, 144, 223; Selement and Woolley, *Shepard’s Confessions*, 22; Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 26.

⁸⁵ Increase Mather, *The Order of the Gospel, Professed and Practiced by the Churches of Christ in New England* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen for Nicholas Buttolph, 1700), 30.

“good physick, to purge out what is evil”⁸⁶
Church Discipline

Church members were not different from the rest of the community in being subject to constant surveillance, but those who chose to stay outside the church covenant, whatever social consequences might have been entailed, also set themselves outside the reach of the church’s disciplinary apparatus.⁸⁷ Only those who had become church members (and later, those who “owned the covenant” but remained in “halfway” membership) were subject to church discipline. The weight of surveillance was magnified for members because they were also volunteering for the scrutiny of disciplinary proceedings if their transgressions were serious enough to bring the attention of church authorities. This could take the form of private conferences and admonitions or public rebukes with attendant humiliation in the meetinghouse. Church discipline was a serious matter that was to be administered with sobriety and care, not capriciously or cruelly, but a public airing of grievances could have serious spiritual and social consequences.

New England’s first generation of puritan leaders had a fraught relationship with church discipline in old England and their memories of persecution remained fresh. However, they had also criticized the English church courts since the time of Elizabeth for failing to adequately discipline moral infractions and in New England they sought to use church discipline to enforce their own brand of piety. Their objections to a centralized and hierarchical episcopacy precluded the establishment of colony-wide church courts and instead vested disciplinary power in individual covenanted churches. Church discipline resulting from watchfulness also provided an outlet and containment mechanism for the problem of slander, which was rampant in old England. English ecclesiastical courts after the Reformations had brought confession into the

⁸⁶ Hooker, *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, pt. iii, pp. 33–34.

⁸⁷ Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints*, 15.

public sphere and penance that had once been left in the confessional was now performed publicly, known to a wide cadre of officials, and preserved in written records.⁸⁸ These processes, which brought gossip and slander into the public eye, “encouraged a promiscuous spread of intimate information.”⁸⁹ New England’s churches tried to contain that outcome by carefully demarcating which offenses should be aired in public. In this way, New England channeled impulses to destructive gossip and slander into a social control mechanism under the control of ministers and elders, though always guided by the laity (both male and female) who were the sources of information and testimony.

The process for disciplining a church member, like that for admission, had stages with gradually increasing audiences. Private offences, defined in the Platform of Church Discipline as those of “one brother offending another,” were to be dealt with first in private in a process drawn directly from scripture (Matt. 18:15-17). Ministers or elders were prohibited from telling the church about private matters brought to their attention unless private attempts at resolution failed, so that “if possible they may be concealed from the world for the honor of the gospel.”⁹⁰ The offended brother was to “go, and convince and admonish him of it, between themselves privately.” If this was unsuccessful, the offended person should “take with him one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established.” If this again failed, they were to bring the grievance to the attention of the pastor or elders, who would approach the

⁸⁸ David H. Flaherty, “Law and the Enforcement of Morals in Early America,” *Perspectives in American History* 5 (1971): 220–21; Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxvii–xxviii; Ingram, “Puritans and the Church Courts,” 63–64; Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander*; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*; Gowing, “Gender and the Language of Insult”; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 182–88; Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 17–18, 42–63; John Bossy, “The Social History of Confession in the Age of Reformation,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975): 21–38.

⁸⁹ Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London*, 194.

⁹⁰ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 18, 164–65; Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 12.

sinner. If any of these approaches were effective in bringing the offender to repentance, the offence considered resolved and was kept private. But if these efforts did not bring about the desired demonstration of repentance, or if the matter had “taken air” and become “a matter of common fame, and the talk of the people” then it would be addressed in a public forum.⁹¹ The elders would inform the church of the dispute, and if the church could not bring the offender to repentance then the person should be publicly admonished, censured, or excommunicated.⁹² In extreme cases, advice was sought from other churches when a dispute was proving intractable. It was impossible to maintain confidentiality when the whole church was responsible for discipline but information could be contained by involving as few people as possible in the process.⁹³ The decision to make a case against a member public was not taken lightly. Opening up disciplinary proceedings risked the reputation of individual members and the church as a whole. As Fiske put it, “we know no reason to cry our weaknesses...nor give occasion to others to speak reproachfully of the church.”⁹⁴

Determining whether an offence was public or private involved evaluating the setting, the participants, and the witnesses. The setting was not the determining factor. When Lidia Dastin was brought before the church for discipline, the meeting was held at the pastor’s house but nevertheless was considered a public meeting and was held there “not for privacy, but for convenience in regard of the weather.”⁹⁵ Private offences were those that were known only to a

⁹¹ Cotton Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae Fratrum Nov-Anglorum. A Faithful Account of the Discipline Professed and Practiced in the Churches of New-England* (Boston: S. Gerrish in Cornhill, 1726), 148–49.

⁹² “A Platform of Church Discipline, 1648,” 227–229.

⁹³ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 155–56; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 78–79; Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxx, xxxiv.

⁹⁴ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 5.

⁹⁵ Cooper and Minkema, “Reading Church Records,” 75.

few, a dispute between two people without witnesses, or one that did not have consequences for the whole community. Sins that threatened to disrupt the community or that had already become publicly known were dealt with in public proceedings. Sins that were considered public included Sabbath breaking, fornication, and drunkenness. Private conscience was not punished, only the actions that resulted from privately (that is, interiorly) held beliefs. Those who opposed infant baptism, for instance, were punished not for their beliefs but for acting on them by turning their backs or walking out during baptism, or by voicing their objections to others.⁹⁶ Other sins that ordinarily would have been considered private, such as disputes over debts or concerns about family government, may have become “common fame” and therefore needed to be addressed in public.⁹⁷ This allowed the community to know the truth about rumors that may have been spreading and was thus another way of containing and disciplining information.

Discipline was the purview of individual churches but could extend across distance when a member had relocated from another church. When a child of the Dorchester church moved to Taunton, he was recommended to the church in his new town but “refused to be under the watch of that church.” Taunton then complained to Dorchester about this “contemptuous carriage” and said that he was “otherwise scandalous.”⁹⁸ A man who was disciplined by the Chelmsford church complained that he had been “wronged” by letters sent to other churches, which caused him to be “discredited publicly and before many even of other churches.” He claimed that in this the church had “wrapped themselves under the guilt of that they charged him with, viz. of

⁹⁶ See the case of John Farnum’s excommunication from Boston Second Church, during which he complained that he was being punished for his conscience because he opposed infant baptism. Boston Second Church Records, Record Book, 1673–1685, Vol. 3.

⁹⁷ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 156.

⁹⁸ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 15–16.

bringing his matters into public before they had dealt with him in private.”⁹⁹ When a woman from Dorchester relocated to Charlestown and was charged with an offense, the Charlestown church determined that she should have her confession read to the Dorchester church since this was where “she scandalously committed her sin.”¹⁰⁰ A member of the Boston First church who had been admitted by letters of dismissal from Taunton was brought before the church for “negligence in his calling” and the church voted to send a letter to Taunton informing them of his transgressions.¹⁰¹

Family disorder was a major concern in Massachusetts churches and offences that might seem private had dire public consequences and were therefore dealt with in public. The family in early modern Anglo-America was always seen as both public and private. While a man’s house was his castle, his household was a little commonwealth. Any disorder that was allowed to fester behind closed doors would inevitably spill out into the streets, infecting others with the contagion of sin. Bethia Hinckley was excommunicated for misusing her husband’s estate including “burning her clothing willfully” and “misspending and idling away much of her precious time, going many days in a week upon unnecessary visits.” The church accused her of “not being of meet help to her husband” and “not taking due care of her family to provide things necessary and convenient for them” but instead giving away the family’s provisions to others. These actions threatened to make the family a public charge and therefore were a public concern, and her visits also encouraged idleness among others.¹⁰² Family disorder was also a public concern if it was publicly known. Joseph Leeds was brought before the Dorchester church for

⁹⁹ Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ Hunnewell, *Charlestown Church Records*, x.

¹⁰¹ Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 49.

¹⁰² “Barnstable, Mass. West Parish Church. Record Book, 1639–1853” (n.d.), New England Hidden Histories, Congregational Library and Archive, Boston MA.

“thrusting his wife out of door and fetching blood at her mouth.” Two people testified that he admitted as much to them, and despite the minister’s attempts to soften the church’s reaction by claiming he had “found it was not as bad as was reported,” the church determined that Joseph needed to show more contrition.¹⁰³

Drunkenness was a public offence that was frequently brought before the church. A church member was unlikely to be disciplined for drunkenness that occurred at home and was only observed by household members, but in theory even that was a public concern because of the danger it created of corrupting subordinates and creating family disorder. Cotton Mather’s Second Church in Boston publicly disciplined several members for excessive drinking. Mather told one church member whose drunkenness had been reported that he would have to make a public confession if inquiries showed that “his scandal was known to many.” The minister soon found that “many in and not of the church knew of the offence” and he therefore brought it before the church and the brother was made to acknowledge his wrong in public before the congregation.¹⁰⁴ Ruth Fuller was excommunicated from Second Church after multiple reports of drunkenness. The church leaders decided that she should not be admitted to the Lord’s Supper until they had investigated since “many heard of the miscarriage” and they encouraged witnesses to provide testimony at a private meeting. Several said they had approached her privately about her behavior but she persisted in drinking to excess. Because she had not heeded private warnings, these testimonies were then read to the church.¹⁰⁵ When Robert Cox was called before Second Church to answer accusations that he had been seen drunk by two witnesses, he said that he had more than he should have but “not so as to be really drunk.” He was also accused of

¹⁰³ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ *Boston Second Church Records*, Vol. 3, 39.

¹⁰⁵ *Boston Second Church Records*, Vol. 3, 46–47.

“lascivious carriage towards his maid servant” which was attested by four witnesses, and there was suspicion that he had contracted the French Pox. The twenty brethren present at this meeting voted to excommunicate him and his “scandalous evils” were “particularly mentioned” in the public meeting. Two years later he tried to have his membership reinstated, but the minister was soon informed that he had “lately broken the Sabbath” by traveling on the Lord’s Day and that he had been seen “in drink.” He was finally readmitted two years after this but was excommunicated again less than a year later for drunkenness and lying.¹⁰⁶

Whether disciplinary cases were heard before a small number of men or the whole church body, punishments were meted out publicly. Censure, admonition, and excommunication were proclaimed before the church and congregation and were not simple statements. Disciplinary action was accompanied by the minister’s scriptural exegesis applied particularly to the sinner’s transgressions, making an example of the wayward member through public humiliation in hope that they would be brought back into the fold.¹⁰⁷ Discipline did not end the church’s duty of watchfulness over a disgraced member. They continued to look for signs of repentance and sometimes confronted them to investigate whether the punishment was having any effect.¹⁰⁸ Excommunication, the most serious punishment the church had in its arsenal, was reserved only for those whose sins were egregious or who refused to show repentance after lesser punishments were issued. Excommunicated members were unable to participate in the sacraments and theoretically was subject to social ostracizing except for the purposes of encouraging remorse.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Boston Second Church Records, Vol. 3, 37–38.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 111. See also the case of Brother Sunderland in Boston Second Church Records, Vol. 3, 25–28.

¹⁰⁸ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ Boston Second Church Records, Vol. 3; James F. Cooper and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *The Colonial Church Records of the First Church of Reading (Wakefield) and the First Church of Rumney Marsh (Revere)* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2006), 16.

While excommunicated members were technically removed from the care of the church, they were not removed from the watch. Excommunication was not understood to be necessarily permanent, and other saints watched the expelled for signs of repentance that could help bring them back into the covenant. When a member had been admonished, censured, or excommunicated, they could count on receiving visits from members who sought to bring them to repentance through private counsel.¹¹⁰ This meant that the pressure that was brought to bear on them and their reputations in the community was not relieved by the passing of a censure, but instead was constantly reiterated. If an excommunicated person was brought to repentance, they were publicly restored to the covenant.

It is plausible that the dearth of disciplinary cases in church records in early decades means watchfulness was actually working quite well. Instead of a sign that either transgressions were not being committed or that they were going unnoticed or unpunished, violations were dealt with by family, friends, and neighbors, or church elders on an informal, private basis rather than being brought before whole church. But the lack of evidence for discipline in records could also have been a way of preserving the reputation of restored members. Records from Salem's First Church are not extant prior to 1660 because the church voted to begin a new record book, ostensibly because the old one was "not well-bound and in some places having been wet and torn, and not legible and not like to continue long to be of use for posterity." They voted that the old book should be kept by the elders but that "some few passages in it which do reflect upon particular persons or upon the whole church without any church vote and without due proof" should be struck out, and in the new book no censures or church business should be recorded "without sufficient proof." Their insistence on proof both in the retention of old records and in

¹¹⁰ Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae*, 148.

the creation of new ones suggests that there was information in the old book considered to be unfounded or injurious.¹¹¹ They recognized, it would seem, that the book had the potential to damage reputations and they sought to erase from official memory any past accusations that had not been proven.

Other records that have been preserved omitted names from potentially embarrassing cases. A woman in the Reading church reported four youths for laughing at the minister as they left the meetinghouse one Lord's Day but it was determined that they had been laughing not at the minister but at someone who farted during the meeting. The woman was accused of "blemishing their names" and defended herself by saying that she never named them when she spoke of it, despite testimonies that said she had named them all. The records protect the identity of those falsely accused by using only their initials.¹¹² Likewise, most ministers did not record the names of those who informed them of the moral transgressions of others. These omissions may have been an unspoken way of encouraging effective watchfulness by ensuring that the information would not be associated with them. Excluding names of informants, ensuring that discipline would not be recorded without proofs, and removing the names of those cleared all show awareness that church records were a place where gossip and news were perpetuated.¹¹³

The church had limited authority to provide moral correction when children of church members did not become members themselves when they reached adulthood. Long before becoming church members in their own right, the children of visible saints were subject to

¹¹¹ Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 87–88.

¹¹² Cooper and Minkema, "Reading Church Records," 76.

¹¹³ Cooper and Minkema, *Church Records of Reading and Rumney Marsh*, 16; Pope, *Notebook of John Fiske*, xxvii–xxviii.

watchfulness through the baptismal covenant.¹¹⁴ Access to baptism was limited to the children of those recognized as members of the elect, so the public performance of baptism before the mixed congregation (both members and unregenerate) served as a reminder to the community of the parent's status within the church.¹¹⁵ It also brought children into the disciplinary regime, putting them under the "watch and care" of the church during the years of their minority with the assumption that they would eventually enact their own voluntary acceptance of the covenant.¹¹⁶ The ties between family and covenant invited church attention to children's upbringing and gave the church sanction to intervene if it was believed that parents were not raising their children to godliness.¹¹⁷

Watch and care of the "children of the church" gained prominence during times of lament about the wayward younger generation and debates over who was eligible for baptism. Part of a godly parent's charge was making sure that their children were catechized and churches began to insist on this more forcefully in the latter half of the century when anxieties about the rising generation began to peak along with fears about the state of their "errand." By 1669, an order from the civil government insisted that elders catechize "the younger people" and "inquire after their profiting by the public means and whether their conversation be answerable in any measure

¹¹⁴ John Davenport, *A Catechisme Containing the Chief Heads of Christian Religion* (London: John Brudenell, 1659), 39; John Cotton, *Spirituell Milk for Boston Babes in Either England. Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments, for Their Soules Nourishment: But May Be of like Use for Any Children* (London: Henry Cripps, 1657), 12.

¹¹⁵ Davenport, *An Answer of the Elders*, 62–66; Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*, Reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1969), 3–4, 6; Perry Miller, "The Puritan Theory of the Sacraments in Seventeenth Century New England," *Catholic Historical Review* 22 (1937): 409–25; John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* (London: M. Simmons for Henry Overton, 1644), 8.

¹¹⁶ Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints*, 11, 24, 139; Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2:257-258; Richard Mather, *A Disputation Concerning Church-Members and Their Children, in Answer to XXI. Questions: Wherein the State of Such Children When Adult, Together with Their Duty towards the Church, and the Churches Duty towards Them Is Discused. By an Assembly of Divines Meeting at Boston in New England, June 4th. 1657* (London: J. Hayes, for Samuel Thomson, 1659); Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 143–59.

¹¹⁷ Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 135–36, 168–84.

thereunto.” The elders were to investigate not only children of the church in this case, but also “all in general” and were to not only observe “in the public” but also to go “from house to house as they are able.”¹¹⁸ The Dorchester church reported receiving a letter from the governor and council in 1685 that asked all ministers and elders to “take care of their flocks by going from house to house and see how the people profiting by the word,” and also using that opportunity for “instructing the youth” and ensuring that all children from age eight to sixteen years be catechized.¹¹⁹ Age did not exempt someone from watchfulness, and catechizing children had the dual effect of watch over both children and their parents. Church elders’ oversight of families, both parents and children, usurped some parental authority.

These concerns in the Dorchester church occurred in context of the debates over the so-called Halfway Covenant.¹²⁰ The theological paradox inherent in their baptismal practice—a belief in regenerate membership based on predestination coupled with the practice of infant baptism—had been unraveling nearly from the beginning of New England’s settlement and became increasingly thorny as many in the rising generation failed to seek full church membership. New England’s puritan ministers formally confronted this contradiction in 1662 when a synod declared that the proper subjects of baptism included the children of those who had been baptized but were thus far unregenerate, so long as the parent proved knowledge of doctrine and was not “scandalous in life.” These “children of the church” could seek a modified form of membership which entitled them to have their children baptized if they “owned the covenant” in a public declaration that included a promise to adhere to the principles of the covenant but

¹¹⁸ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 58; Upham, *Beverly First Church Records*, 85.

¹¹⁹ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 93.

¹²⁰ The term “halfway covenant” was not used at the time and did not come into use until the 1760s, but it is useful shorthand for the extension of baptism in the synod of 1662. See Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 8n2.

stopped short of a personal relation.¹²¹ Creating a new category of membership extended watchfulness over a new generation and increased the churches' ability to impose consequences on those who had not become full members.

Watch over children of the church into their adulthood grew in importance during the seventeenth century when New England puritans believed that God's wrath had turned against them at the same time that American-born children were coming into adulthood and failing to seek full membership. The puritan revolution in England had failed to produce the expected godly commonwealth there and the restoration of the English monarchy threatened Massachusetts's independence in religious, economic, and legal affairs. The revocation of colonial charters and imposition of the Dominion of New England, Quaker incursions after mid-century, and newly emboldened Baptists who formed their own meetings all added to the sense of precarity. The puritan experiment in New England seemed to be hanging by a thread and the perceived decline of piety among young adults was yet another threat to their ability to impose discipline and order. Churches encouraged increased watchfulness over children of the church and encouraged them to exercise self-watch. Some also warned them that they could be subject to discipline "according as their age or capacity would permit."¹²² While the emphasis of "watch and care" had been on the "care" of members during the first decades of settlement, their focus seemed to shift into watching as time went on and fears increased among the leadership that they were losing control. While many churches concluded that children of the church were meant to

¹²¹ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 157–237, 288–339; Miller, *Colony to Province*, 115–16; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 38; *Propositions Concerning the Subject of Baptism and Consociation of Churches, Collected and Confirmed out of the Word of God by a Synod of Elders and Messengers of the Churches in Massachusetts-Colony in New-England* (Cambridge, MA: S.G. for Hezekiah Usher, 1662), 19.

¹²² *Dorchester First Church Records*, 33, 69–70; Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 90.

be subject to watch and discipline, the process of “owning the covenant” added an additional public dimension to their status.¹²³

The laity in many churches resisted implementation of halfway membership, but questions about the exercise of church watch and discipline over children of the church were not abstract.¹²⁴ As the end of the century drew close, churches increasingly found themselves addressing the transgressions of these adult children and extending the right of baptism expanded the number of people in the community who were subject to the formal apparatus of church watchfulness and discipline, important at a time when concerns about disorder among the young were rising. Watchfulness over children of the church was also a central concern in many of the so-called “covenant renewals” that took hold in the 1670s. One of the provoking evils identified by the synod in 1679 was a failure to exercise sufficient discipline over “children of the covenant,” meaning those who had been baptized.¹²⁵ They also identified a litany of sins that were being left unchecked, including “irreverent behavior,” Sabbath breaking, pride in apparel, and a variety of sins of the tongue including “evil surmisings, uncharitable and unrighteous censures, back-bitings, hearing and telling tales,” as well as “promise breaking,” “false reports,” slander, and “reproaches.”¹²⁶ Churches participating in these covenant renewals mentioned being “remiss” in watchfulness as a provoking evil, a sign that the communal sense of responsibility for behavior was perhaps breaking down at the end of the century.¹²⁷

¹²³ Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 105, 112–13; Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 183.

¹²⁴ On implementation of the halfway covenant, see Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, chapter 5.

¹²⁵ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 428.

¹²⁶ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 427–31. On the relationship between the synod of 1679 and the revived “reformation of manners” at the end of the century, see Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679–1749* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), chapter 1.

¹²⁷ Henigman, *Coming into Communion*, 59–61.

* * *

Watchfulness in New England's puritan churches institutionalized a cultural practice brought from old England. While observation had often worked against dissenters during the Reformations, New England's puritan churches harnessed it to their benefit, encouraging social conformity and enforcing community standards for behavior and conversation. They enshrined this imperative to surveillance in their church covenants, making mutual watchfulness an obligation of sainthood. This practice defined the visibility of visible saints by exposing them to the eyes of the community and making them vulnerable to the wagging tongues of their neighbors whose talk fulfilled an obligation, not simply a prurient curiosity. Church membership was a public status that was publicly performed, but observation of their behavior extended into the private household, passing judgment on marital relations and child-rearing. The process of becoming a church member brought words before the church and congregation that influenced and created reputations, spreading stories to a wide audience despite efforts to distinguish between public and private disputes. Lay control over the churches made the judgment of peers an integral part of determining sainthood, which in turn helped recreate and enact village cohesion in newly formed communities by introducing members' pasts to the group. Personal knowledge was the currency of reputation and words' weight as evidence depended on familiarity, extending the networks of watchfulness across geographic space as well as time. Personal relations, whether given personally or read for them, gave the member an opportunity for self-presentation to the community of saints and announced that they belonged by exposing themselves to the scrutiny of the group. Extending the obligations of watchfulness to children through baptism created generational continuity and ensured that children were conditioned and

socialized into the system of surveillance. The practice of soliciting dismissions, or character references, further extended the practice of watchfulness over geographic distances and drew churches into an extended network of watchfulness. This mutual watchfulness supported the saints' practice of self-watch and mitigated the threat of hypocrites in their midst by reining in waywardness, providing a defense against reproach from critics in old England, and protecting the community from God's wrath. Watchfulness was a vital component of the communal project of creating and sustaining a godly society, and despite the prohibition on women's speech inside the meetinghouse, they actively participated in its oral and aural culture. The rules that governed women's speech, however, were made and enforced by male authorities. While watchfulness was meant to be a totalizing mechanism, the limitations created by a closed church body meant that it needed to extend into the civil world as well.

CHAPTER TWO

To See Good Order Kept: Watchfulness in Law Enforcement and Criminal Punishment

Seventeenth-century Bostonians lived as much in the streets, fields, and common areas of the town as they did in their homes and meetinghouses. As in most early modern towns, life took place largely out of doors. Regulating order in those spaces was both vital and challenging in a settlement where houses were closely built, people shared streets with animals and carts, and residential areas were dotted with the activities of industry and manufacture. Town and colony leaders were concerned with keeping both peace and order in their new community and the volume of laws they created for this purpose indicates an uphill battle for enforcement. Magistrates repeatedly ordered inhabitants to prevent blocking public pathways and to halt activities that were “noisome [foul-smelling] to any in the neighborhood.” The air would have been foul indeed, however; the smells of livestock and manure, butchered animals, rotten fish, food waste, privies, and soap production mingled with wood smoke, brewing beer, and cooking smells. Scavengers were employed to collect refuse that had been dumped in the streets and common areas. Neighbors frequently found themselves in court to resolve disputes about improper maintenance or location of fences, detritus thrown in streets or wharves, gates and posts preventing passage in lanes, pigs and dogs roaming free, galloping horses, carts left in the right of way, blocked drains sending water through neighbors’ cellars, and dangerously neglected or ill-constructed chimneys threatening fire. This *mélange* of people, animals, and activities in a relatively small space made Boston functionally urban, but in the absence of a police force, animal control officer, or fire brigade, the people of Boston depended on their neighbors to

follow the laws and magistrates relied on inhabitants to inform them when their neighbors failed to comply.¹ Bostonians' occupation of public spaces was only supposed to last until nightfall, however. At nine o'clock a bell was rung and constables began their rounds, walking the town to make sure that nothing was amiss and no disorder threatened.² The streets would then be quiet and dark, illuminated only by the moon and by lights from windows. The low voices of the patrols were meant to be the only human noises and any others would be investigated.

Boston was a bustling port town but in geographic terms quite small. Even when unpaved streets and blocked rights-of-way impeded travel, the populated areas of the peninsula could probably have been walked in less than an hour.³ Though it was the most populous English settlement in New England, Boston retained the attributes of a face-to-face society, characterized by oral communication and the ordering of social and economic relationships through credit and reputation.⁴ The same was true for law enforcement and moral regulation, which relied heavily on watchfulness for their force and function. Just as with the church, traditions of surveillance that were brought to Boston's shores from England were reinforced by the puritan principle of "holy watching." While watchfulness, shaming, and informing as law enforcement techniques were not peculiar to puritan "busybodies," the shared cultural and social

¹ This description is drawn from the Boston town records, which show attempts to regulate disorder in the built environment and its uses. See, for example, *Second Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston; Containing the Boston Records, 1634–1660, and the Book of Possessions*, Third ed. (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1920), 1–2, 18, 31, 60–61, 70, 91, 97, 98, 111–13, 118–19, 131, 135, 139, 159; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Records from 1660 to 1701 [Seventh Report]* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1881), 1–2, 8, 118.

² John Dunton, *Letters Written from New-England, A.D. 1686. By John Dunton. In Which Are Described His Voyages by Sea, His Travels on Land, and the Characters of His Friends and Acquaintances*, ed. W.H. Whitmore, Publications of the Prince Society (Boston: Prince Society, 1867), 68–69.

³ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 4.

⁴ Adam J. Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," *Michigan Law Review* 80 (1982): 1223.

heritage brought to Massachusetts Bay by English inhabitants, settlers, and visitors reinforced official proclamations of a particularly puritan moral enforcement.⁵ New England puritans established enforcement offices that mirrored those they had known in old England, but they vested them with greater responsibility for moral enforcement than had been the case in England. Because only church members were subject to discipline in the churches and the colony lacked ecclesiastical courts that could enforce morality more broadly, civil officers were given more authority to respond to moral infractions. The continuity of titles and duties somewhat masks the more extensive bulwark against disorder provided by these officers. Puritan churches in New England had harnessed the kinds of surveillance and discipline that were used against them in England, and New England's law enforcement officers were entrusted with more comprehensive powers to uncover and halt disorder than were their English counterparts.⁶ Puritans in old England had incentive to deal with disorder internally when they were pursued as nonconformists, but when they were the authorities in New England there was incentive to encourage people to bring problems to them for resolution. Civil officers supplemented holy watching, creating an environment in which everyone was potentially being surveilled at all times. The requirement that homes be clustered near meetinghouses aided in safety and defense but also facilitated social control by increasing density and opportunities for watchfulness. The expansion over time of formal watching officers shows that there were times and places where some might try to evade prying eyes and ears, that informal watching was insufficient, and that the church's spiritual penalties needed support from temporal authorities.

⁵ Konig, *Law and Society*, 30, 117, 129. McIntosh argues that "anxiety about misbehavior" was not new in England in the seventeenth century and that the "outburst of concern" around 1600 was not necessarily linked to puritanism. She did, however, argue that the "intensity" with which moral regulation was pursued was new and linked to puritan influence. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior*, 2–14. See also Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, 200–211.

⁶ Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 75–78.

The cultural and social world New England's puritans had inhabited in England was one that emphasized government regulation of local affairs, including personal morality and behavior. They continued this tradition, creating mechanisms whereby informal observation and formal surveillance were both harnessed in the service of enforcing laws that emphasized good order and at least the behavioral demonstration of moral uprightness. Massachusetts incentivized watchfulness among inhabitants by rewarding informers with a portion of levied fines and by appointing officials who conducted formal surveillance, and when criminals were punished it was often in public ways that benefited from the habits of gossip inculcated by both their English heritage and their puritan religious imperatives.⁷ Punishments publicized errors and displayed criminals' bodies before the community while reinforcing a sense of common morality and common purpose that was belied by the frequency of moral transgressions. Officers of civil government in Boston relied on and implicitly encouraged gossip and word of mouth to regulate reputation and to keep order in their jurisdiction. These laws and practices made watchfulness, both formal and informal, vital to the maintenance of order.

“silently but vigilantly walk their several turns”⁸
Informal Watchfulness and Enforcement Officers

Surveillance of one's neighbors was not only a religious imperative but also vital to law enforcement. While church members were supposed to report unresolved disputes and public offences to the church, all Bostonians had a dual duty of watchfulness in both meetinghouse and

⁷ Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman in the Tudor and Early Stuart Age* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), 314; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 190; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 5. There is a rich historiography debating the influence of puritanism on moral regulation. See the discussions in McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior*, introduction; Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, postscript. For the purposes of this study it is sufficient to note that New England puritans' concern with and emphasis on legislating morality did not originate with migration to North America.

⁸ *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 9.

town house and were meant to report lawbreaking to the magistrates. The obligation to inform on one's neighbors to civil authorities was limited if a "private crime or offence" posed no danger to the colony or its inhabitants, or "when any necessary tie of conscience binds him to secrecy," a concession to the secrets or confessions shared among friends or family that some historians have posited allowed neighbors to preserve the peace in a face-to-face society where good relations and reputation were vital to the social and economic functions of the community. Massachusetts inhabitants were reluctant to inform on each other unless the level of disorder became intolerable or a feud gave leverage to accusations.⁹ Even the eager puritans that settled Massachusetts seem to have been hesitant to inform on their neighbors, but there were also times and places in which those with spiritual incentives to watch their neighbors were not able to observe illicit activities and those who did observe were unlikely to report. Massachusetts Bay magistrates tried to counter this reluctance to translate informal, neighborly surveillance into official complaints by instituting a system similar to what they had known in England, in which informers were rewarded with a portion of the fines collected from those convicted on their evidence, what one historian called "the mercenary first cousin of holy watching."¹⁰ Watchfulness in the church offered spiritual rewards, but in the temporal world there was more tangible recompense.

Allowing informers to share in fines was common in old England, a way of persuading people to involve themselves in community regulation and a class of "professional informers"

⁹ William H. Whitmore, *The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts. Reprinted from the Edition of 1672, with the Supplements through 1686* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1890), 47; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 202, 208–10, 217. For a similar interpretation of problems of informing on one's neighbors in the English context, see Margaret Gay Davies, *The Enforcement of English Apprenticeship: A Study in Applied Mercantilism, 1563–1642* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 249.

¹⁰ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 201–10. Quote from McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 69.

developed there. Monetary rewards seem to have largely failed to convince American puritans to inform against their neighbors to authorities despite their propensity to observe each other's behavior.¹¹ Still, the system of remunerating informers in Massachusetts Bay did allow some crimes to become public that might otherwise have been hidden from the formal apparatus of law enforcement, primarily economic transgressions such as illegal or deceitful trading.¹² Those who informed magistrates of law-breaking were not usually the victims of the crimes—in fact, they were sometimes participants who informed on themselves to reduce their fines.¹³ They could also be competitors who were placed at a disadvantage by those who skirted the law. Informers also shared in fines when they reported moral and religious transgressions that created a threat of disorder, particularly those that occurred behind closed doors and could therefore not be discovered without them.¹⁴

Towns incentivized informing for crimes that created public danger, such as failure to have chimneys swept, and for pilfering town resources.¹⁵ Informers were rewarded for reporting

¹¹ Davies, *Enforcement of English Apprenticeship*, 25; Flaherty, “Law and the Enforcement of Morals in Early America,” 237.

¹² McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 68; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: 1628–1641*, vol. 1 (Boston: William White, printer to the Commonwealth, 1853), 148; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: 1644–1657*, vol. 3 (Boston: William White, printer to the Commonwealth, 1854), 168–69, 264, 297–98, 353–56, 374–75, 424; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: 1650–1660*, vol. 4, part 1 (Boston: William White, printer to the Commonwealth, 1854), 39–40, 105; Nathaniel Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: 1661–1674*, vol. 4, part 2 (Boston: William White, printer to the Commonwealth, 1854), 43, 344, 384, 450; Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 1854, 5:28, 347, 374.

¹³ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 206. Victims of sexual crimes, on the other hand, were punished for not reporting it. Women and girls who were raped would be punished if they failed to “cry out” or report the attack right away because that implied some measure of consent. See McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 70; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 207; Block, *Rape and Sexual Power*, esp. ch. 3.

¹⁴ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 68.

¹⁵ *Town Records of Salem, 1634–1659*, vol. 1, Essex Institute Historical Collections 2 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1868), 14; Martha O. Howes, ed., *Town Records of Salem, Massachusetts, 1659–1680*, vol. 2 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1913), 32, 119; *The Early Records of the Town of Rowley, Massachusetts. 1639–1672. Being Volume One of the Printed Records of the Town*, vol. 1 (Rowley, MA, 1894), 92, 96, 165; *Watertown Records, Comprising the First and Second Books of Town Proceedings with the Land Grants and Possessions Also the*

people who facilitated Indians' access to alcohol; who risked fire by taking tobacco near a house, barn, corn, or hay cock; and who participated in illegal gaming with cards or dice.¹⁶ Informers were rewarded for reporting those who corrupted youths by "drawing them both by night and by day from their callings, studies, honest occupations, and lodging places."¹⁷ The prevalence of economic transgressions in statutes that encouraged informing, however, seems to have left informal moral policing primarily in the realm of church discipline. Those outside the church could not be counted on to inform on others' moral failings and because church discipline only extended to church members this could have left the unchurched multitudes outside the bounds of moral watchfulness. This gap was theoretically filled by a number of town officials whose duties were to observe and root out disorder and by the requirement for any in the town to assist these officials in enforcing statutes that promoted both public safety and moral order.

Law enforcement and moral surveillance, like church discipline, relied on watchfulness. The leaders and founders of Massachusetts Bay recognized from the outset that the promise of compensation and spiritual imperatives were insufficient to transform casual surveillance by neighbors, families, and church members into law enforcement. There were those who sought to evade detection and those who refused to defer to the authority of church and magistrate.¹⁸ The biggest potential impediment to effective watchfulness was that nefarious activities often occurred in times and places where their perpetrators were likely to be free from surveillance. Particularly after dark or on the Sabbath, when the streets, fields, and barns were out of view of

Proprietors' Book and the First Book and Supplement of Births Deaths and Marriages (Watertown, MA: Fred G. Barker, 1894), 61, 99; *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 124, 129; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 218.

¹⁶ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:425–26; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:449–50; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 146.

¹⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:242; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 27.

¹⁸ Eli Faber, "Puritan Criminals: The Economic, Social, and Intellectual Background to Crime in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *Perspectives in American History* 11 (1977): 85, 87.

inhabitants who had retreated to their homes, the danger of disorder was high and the chances of incidental observation were low. Those who witnessed these activities were unlikely to report them since they would themselves have been present and therefore likely participants in unsavory activities. Law enforcement officers were meant to pick up where self-regulation and informal surveillance failed or were non-existent and their duties extended watchfulness to times and places that would normally have gone unobserved by those who might cast a critical eye.

To help maintain both security and order, the leaders of the colony called upon their English experiences of law enforcement to appoint officers of the court who were responsible for formal watchfulness.¹⁹ Constables and night watchmen were tasked with taking special notice of potential or actual disorder in their midst. The number of formal watching officers and their duties increased over time, particularly when external events heightened fears of disorder. While this was related to the growing population of the town it is also a sign that informal watchfulness was failing in effectiveness as the unchurched population swelled and the port attracted more strangers, sailors, and soldiers. Officials simply could not be everywhere, even in a geographically bounded settlement like Boston, and the number of men walking the streets conducting official surveillance was insufficient to keep eyes on everything and everyone. Some of these officials also refused to see, or participated in illicit activities, and certainly all made calculated decisions about which transgressions to report and which to let slide.

¹⁹ For overviews of the English precedents for Massachusetts town offices, see Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 75–76; Francis J. Bremer, “The County of Massachusetts: The Governance of John Winthrop’s Suffolk and the Shaping of the Massachusetts Bay Colony,” in *The World of John Winthrop: Essays on England and New England 1588–1649*, ed. Francis J. Bremer and Lynn A. Botelho (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005), 192–93; Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop’s Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 44; Eric H. Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America 1860–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 31–35; Keith Wrightson, “Two Concepts of Order: Justices, Constables and Jurymen in Seventeenth-Century England,” in *An Ungovernable People: The English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. John Brewer and John Styles (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 21–46. See also Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, chap. 7.

When informal watchfulness failed, the first line of defense protecting towns against moral indiscretions and general disorder were the constables, chosen by the select men in each town for a one-year term. Constables were appointed almost immediately after towns were established, and as early as 1636 the General Court recognized that the expansive duties of constables—and, by inference, the extent of lawbreaking—were such that each town needed two constables to distribute the labor.²⁰ Constables were invested with a symbol of the office, a black staff “five foot long, tipped at the upper end about five inches with brass,” which they were to carry any time they were conducting official business. Constables were the closest thing seventeenth-century Boston had to a police force and were responsible for the formal duties of law enforcement, including serving warrants and summons, pursuing and detaining suspected criminals, investigating property crimes, and performing corporal punishments.²¹

In Boston, one of the constables’ most important duties during times of peace was overseeing the night watch, another institution imported from England.²² The night watch was a group of men who patrolled the town in pairs overnight during the summer months, generally May through September, when longer days and warmer weather increased the number of people on the streets and boats at the wharves.²³ The watch and the constables worked in concert to prevent danger and disorder. As the English population increased over the first decades of

²⁰ The number of constables increased to six by mid-century. Rutman, *Winthrop’s Boston*, 226.

²¹ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 31; McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 58–60; David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 67–68.

²² On the constable’s watch, see Rutman, *Winthrop’s Boston*, 225–26; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America 1625–1742* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1938), 65–67; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 16, 231. In the first decade of settlement and during times of war, the watch was under the command of militia captains. Rutman, *Winthrop’s Boston*, 225n50. English tradition carried an assumption that criminality and danger were more likely at times when people were not easily observed. See Paul Griffiths, “Meanings of Nightwalking in Early Modern England,” *The Seventeenth Century* 13 (1998): 212–38.

²³ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 66.

settlement, the number of watchmen increased from six men to watch over Boston, Charlestown, and Roxbury in 1631, to as many as twelve on the peninsula alone by 1659. These men patrolled in pairs through the town all night under the authority of the constable, looking out for signs of fire, enemy threats, or disorder. The hours of the watch fluctuated but were generally between sunset and sunrise.²⁴ The night watch's rounds were periodically specified by the town. In 1677, for example, selectmen ordered that the watch should consist of eight men,

of which two to walk to and fro at the North end of the town to John Cony's lane, two thence to the prison lane, and down the broad street and about the dock, two from the town house to Deacon Elliott's house, two thence to the gate upon the neck, who are to cause the gate to be shut at night and opened at five in the morning, and you are to give special charge to the watch to be careful about fire, and whatsoever Indians shall be found going or coming to commit to prison, or any other disorderly persons.²⁵

After Metacom's War, the regular town watch was supplemented by militia companies and the total watch included upwards of forty men, several of whom were particularly charged with guarding the powder stores. This military watch was eventually reduced to eight men and the civilian watch was still functioning at the end of the century, when the town designated that ten men should walk "two in each quarter of the town, and two through the whole town."²⁶ With the exception of special military watches, the night watch was activated only during summer

²⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1853, 1:90; Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:224; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company, Deputies' Records 1644-1657*, 3:265; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1854, 4, part 1:83, 293, 384; *Boston Town Records, 1634-1660*, 8; *Boston Town Records, 1660-1701*, 119, 128. The early watches may have been primarily military in nature, but certainly by 1640 there were civilian watches under the authority of the constables whose primary duty was rooting out disorder. See Edwin Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts 1620-1692: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 430.

²⁵ *Boston Town Records, 1660-1701*, 113.

²⁶ *Boston Town Records, 1660-1701*, 132, 136, 231. McManus notes in passing that theoretically there was also a "ward" responsible for watching during daytime hours. I have found no evidence that a ward was appointed before the end of the century, which supports the idea that a formal watch was most necessary at times and places when godly members of the community would not have been able to observe. It is also possible that they did not want to pull men away from their productive callings during the day. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 65.

months, but by the early 1650s Boston appointed a smaller number of paid “bellmen” to walk the town overnight during the winter months.²⁷ There seem to have only been two bellmen, in contrast to the eight to twelve men appointed as night watchmen during the summer, and they walked separately rather than in pairs as the watchmen did. The same men were appointed to this post year after year, one serving in that office for over a decade.²⁸ In the late 1670s, the bellmen were joined by two others appointed to “walk privately about the town every night to prevent fire or disorder in the town” during the times of the year when there were no constables’ watches.²⁹

While overnight hours were particularly fraught, watching officers’ purview eventually included even the inside of the meetinghouse. Constables, night watchmen, and bellmen were not enough to reign in unruly colonists, particularly when refugees unaccustomed to strict Sabbath enforcement began pouring in from western areas under threat from Indian raids.³⁰ To prevent “disorder and rudeness” by young people in the meetinghouse during services, the court ordered that town selectmen designate a place for the children and youths to sit “where they may be most together and in public view” and appoint “some grave and sober person or persons to take a particular care of and inspection over them.”³¹ They were to be observed both by this designated individual and by all those assembled in the meetinghouse and prevented from gathering in corners or other areas where their behavior could not be overseen. When Boston

²⁷ On military watches and their relationship with the constables’ watches, see Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:120; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 25–26; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 64–67.

²⁸ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 115, 118, 120; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 11, 18, 44, 72, 79, 97, 113, 123.

²⁹ *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 108.

³⁰ Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 76.

³¹ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:60–61.

appointed a man for this purpose at the “new meetinghouse” he was permitted to use a “small wand” to correct any that he found either outside the meetinghouse or “such as are disorderly within.”³² This type of surveillance was not new. In the late 1650s a man had been paid by the constable for “looking to the boys at the meetinghouse” and another was appointed to “oversee the youth in the new meetinghouse, that they behave themselves reverently in the time of divine worship.”³³ These new laws in the 1670s, however, gave teeth to the long-standing expectation of oversight, meaning that disorderly people within the meetinghouse were to be more systematically observed and disciplined as well if they were not sufficiently attentive. These officials were told to present a list of offenders to the magistrates, who would punish transgressors with fines or whipping.³⁴

The colony and town also enforced attendance at Sabbath exercises. As early as 1634/5, the General Court empowered the Assistants to punish absence from the meetinghouse with fines or imprisonment.³⁵ By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Sabbath became a time when unruly people found themselves unsupervised by authorities if they stayed outside the meetinghouse during the exercise or participated in forbidden activities between sundown Saturday and sundown Sunday when the godly were largely indoors. The court singled out “children’s playing in the streets and other places” and “youths, maids, and other persons, both strangers and others, uncivilly walking the streets and fields, travelling from town to town, going on shipboard, frequenting common houses and other places to drink, sport, and otherwise to misspend that precious time.” They decreed that transgressors, even children, were to be

³² *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 28, 31.

³³ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 151.

³⁴ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 131; Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:60–61.

³⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:140; 3:99.

admonished or fined for offending and whipped if they could not pay the fine. This law was to be posted on the meetinghouse doors by the constables for at least one month so that none could claim ignorance without revealing that they had not been to services. Constables were soon made responsible for apprehending Sabbath breakers “found without either meetinghouse, idling or playing during the time of public exercise” and bringing them before the magistrates (presumably after services had ended).³⁶

The General Court passed a series of laws designating men who would uphold the Sabbath laws both inside and outside the meetinghouse, and they particularly focused on complaints about young people whose “unreverent carriage and behavior” disrupted the day.³⁷ They noted the “sad” observation that when “the sun being set, both every Saturday and on the Lords day, young people and others take liberty to walk and sport themselves in the streets or fields in the several towns of this jurisdiction.” These miscreants often ended up in ordinaries or taverns. Therefore, they said, any found “sporting in the streets or fields..., drinking, or being in any house of entertainment, (unless strangers or sojourners, as in their lodgings)” without sufficient excuse would be fined or given corporal punishment.³⁸ A law also allowed any inhabitant to apprehend a person who violated the Sabbath with “abusive carriage or misbehavior” or “by making any noise or otherwise” and take them to a cage in the market place to be held there in view of passersby until authorities could determine their punishment.³⁹ A

³⁶ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:316–17; 4, part 1:150–51; *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 131.

³⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 1:200–201.

³⁸ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 4, part 1:347.

³⁹ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:133. Incarceration was not a widely used punishment in seventeenth-century New England. Jails were primarily used to temporarily hold drunks until they sobered up or to house particularly dangerous criminals before trial. See McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England, 176–79*. On the transition to incarceration and penitentiaries in the eighteenth century, see Jen Manion, *Liberty’s Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

watch was set from sundown Saturday to nine at night whose task was to “walk between the fortification and the towns end” and prevent any cart, footman, or horseman from leaving town after the Sabbath had begun.⁴⁰

Appointing officers to ensure that the Sabbath was kept was necessary because this was a time when there should not have been any residents abroad on the streets, which meant no one could report shirkers without raising suspicion that they too had violated Sabbath restrictions. Concerns for Sabbath violations outside the meetinghouse and moral failings more generally led to the revival of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval office of tithingmen. In England this office had been an administrative peacekeeping position that gave a man power to oversee a subdivision of a hundred or a manor, but in New England tithingmen were intended primarily to enforce Sabbath laws and search out disorderly behavior between sundown Saturday and sundown Sunday.⁴¹ Tithingmen were named not for the collection of funds but rather for the tradition that each would oversee ten neighboring households, a tradition that had been revived first with the introduction of surveillance aimed at ferreting out unlicensed ordinaries.⁴² The “tithing” as an administrative unit had largely been subsumed by shires, parishes, and manors in old England and the office of tithingman had fallen into disuse, but New England translated the traditional office into a way of enforcing godly order in neighborhoods and sanctioning particular men to actively investigate the morality of those who lived around them. The duties of tithingmen were expanded in the aftermath of the Reforming Synod in 1679.⁴³ They were expected to “inspect

⁴⁰ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:239–40.

⁴¹ Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly*, 63; Konig, *Law and Society*, 134; Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts*, 147, 432.

⁴² Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:61–62, 133, 155; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 195–96; Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly*, 63; Konig, *Law and Society*, 134; Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts*, 147, 432.

⁴³ Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly*, 37.

the manners of all disorderly persons” and give them “private admonitions.” If that failed, they would present the names to the magistrates. Disorder was defined broadly, to include

all single persons that live from under family government, stubborn and disorderly children and servants, night walkers, tipplers, Sabbath breakers, by night or by day, and such as absent themselves from the public worship of God on the Lords days, or whatever the course or practice of any person or persons whatsoever tending to debauchery, irreligion, profaneness, and atheism among us, wherein the omission of family government, nurture, and religious duties, and instruction of children and servants, or idleness, profligate, uncivil, or rude practices of any sort.⁴⁴

Now tithingmen were not only empowered to inspect houses in search of illegal drinking but also to search cellars and outbuildings where they believed unlicensed drink was being stored. If any was found, they could enlist the help of a magistrate or constable to confiscate and dispose of the beverages.⁴⁵

This office, like the constables and watch, was unattractive enough that the court had to impose fines on any who refused to serve.⁴⁶ By 1684/5, the General Court lamented that there was “great neglect” among the men “entrusted to see the observation of such orders as from time to time hath been enacted, especially such as have a tendency to the reformations of such evils as are found amongst us.” They ordered that constables and tithingmen were “strictly required to do their utmost to be faithful in the discharge of their respective duties as to Sabbath breaking, tippling, and drinking, and town dwellers misspending their time in public houses of entertainment.”⁴⁷ These admonitions did little to improve enthusiasm for the office or to

⁴⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:241.

⁴⁵ Shurtleff, 5:240–41.

⁴⁶ Shurtleff, 5:261; Flaherty, “Law and the Enforcement of Morals in Early America,” 244.

⁴⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 5:470.

increase their numbers. After choosing seventy-three tithingmen in the 1670s, Boston appointed only between sixteen and twenty by the mid-1690s.⁴⁸

Sabbath laws focused on preventing disorder outside the meetinghouse during exercises, when young people and other mischief-makers could indulge in sin or idleness unobserved by the godly who were inside. Prosecution for Sabbath law violations still relied upon informants, however, not only on the official inspections and surveillance of constables and tithingmen. Children might see men lounging in the fields or orchards, or offenders might be observed in drunken revelry by people journeying to morning exercises or home from evening services.⁴⁹ Numerous people were fined for Sabbath violations, often due to their pursuit of economic activities. Women were fined for “ironing cloths upon a public fast” and “working with her needle” during the Sabbath, activities that would have likely been visible from the street while the women worked in their doorways or other public areas to take advantage of the light. A sailor was cited for “hoisting his sails to dry them” on the Sabbath, and another for “tending and drying his leather,” activities that took place not within shops but in the open for others to observe.⁵⁰ Murkier were the cases of men who kept their shops open on the Sabbath. Presumably these butchers and artisans did not think the Sabbath so strictly observed that they would not find customers, but none seem to have been cited for enjoying these illicit shopping opportunities.⁵¹ Of course, there were some who simply sought entertainment during the

⁴⁸ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 198.

⁴⁹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:179, 184; 2:36.

⁵⁰ *Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671–1680. Part I*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts Collections, vol. 29 (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1933), 307; *Records of the Suffolk County Court 1671–1680, Part II*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Boston, vol. 30, Collections (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1933), 867.

⁵¹ *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:645, 942.

Sabbath and were prosecuted for drinking in homes or taverns.⁵² In practice, Sabbath laws were most often enforced on those suspected of unorthodox religious opinions, particularly those absent from the meetinghouse who had either Quaker or Anabaptist sympathies.⁵³

“take notice of offenders in this kind”⁵⁴
Suspicious Times, Places, and People

Although their offices were distinct, the night watch, bellmen, and tithingmen had overlapping duties. They were given broad powers of surveillance and the types of disorder they were encouraged to root out were extensive. Generally, their remit was to report and sometimes detain anyone who was in a place they should not be and anyone participating in activities suspected of promoting disorder. Among the most suspicious people were “nightwalkers,” vagrants, youths and servants, and strangers. Instructions given to the night watch were explicit about the kinds of people who were and were not suspected of being disorderly. They should “duly examine all nightwalkers after ten of the clock in the night, unless they be known to be peaceable inhabitants, to inquire whither they are going, and what their business is.”⁵⁵ Those who had good reputations could be assumed to have legitimate reasons for being out at night. If any “young men, maids, women or other persons, not of known fidelity” were found walking after ten at night, the watchmen were to “modestly demand the cause of their being abroad” and if they seemed to be “upon ill minded employment” then they should “watch them narrowly and

⁵² *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:958, 1018.

⁵³ See, for example, John F. Cronin, *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay 1630–1692*, vol. 3 (Boston: County of Suffolk, 1928), 171–78; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:104–5.

⁵⁴ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 66.

⁵⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:282.

to command them to repair to their lodgings.”⁵⁶ Those who might not be adequately supervised were probably up to no good. The very presence of someone on the streets at night was suspicious, more so if the person was someone who should have been under supervision or who evaded family government—a stranger, a youth, or a servant—but anyone who could not give sufficient reason for being out at night was automatically suspect. The same was true for people found in disorderly or unlicensed ordinaries or public houses, or who were found abroad during the Sabbath.⁵⁷

The watch was a regular feature of life in Boston and anyone in the street at night was likely to encounter them at some point. Being out at night was suspicious enough to warrant further investigation by the watchmen and sometimes this uncovered more sinister activity. Edward Naylor and Hudson Leverett were found “abroad” by the watchmen on the same night that “sundry disorders and riots [were] committed” and although they denied being involved in the “damage,” the coincidence (and perhaps their prior reputations) were enough to convince the court and they were sentenced to pay for damages sustained that night.⁵⁸ When the watch found Abigail King “abroad at an unseasonable time of night...at which time she was in drink” it gave them reason to inspect her house, where they found many people drinking, including some servants. Finding her outdoors at night gave them reason to suspect disorder at her house and to enter it to investigate.⁵⁹ Even someone as prominent as Samuel Sewall was not immune to interrogation. His wife gave birth at midnight in April 1677 and as he walked the midwife home

⁵⁶ *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 9.

⁵⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 1:324–27. A good summary of constables’ duties can be found in Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts*, 424–29.

⁵⁸ *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:812. Edward Naylor’s reputation for disorder is more fully explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

⁵⁹ *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:336–37.

about two in the morning, they encountered the watch, “who bade us stand, [and] enquired what we were.” Sewall explained the circumstances and the watchmen “bade God bless our labors, and let us pass.”⁶⁰ A less reputable or well-known pair on an equal errand would likely not have been so readily believed.

Some people were considered particularly suspicious because of the social groups to which they belonged. Youths, servants, idle persons, strangers, vagabonds, soldiers and sailors, and Indians were all singled out for special attention in the law. The courts were particularly concerned with those who might draw young people and servants away from family government and draw them into unsavory activities. Household heads who failed to adequately educate and discipline their charges risked having magistrates step in to issue punishments or even remove the subordinates to better ordered households. Those who were found to entice youths and servants into spending time away from their houses, callings, or studies were subject to steep fines. Constables were responsible for notifying the town government of any dangers to the young people of their town and also to keep a list of “young persons within the bounds of your town, and all adjacent farms though out of all town bounds, who do live from under family government, viz. do not serve their parents or masters, as children, apprentices, hired-servants, or journey-men ought to do.”⁶¹ The courts received “good information and sad complaints” about those who failed to provide for their families and risked creating public charges to support their dependents, and charged constables to “use special care to take notice of offenders in this kind,

⁶⁰ M. Halsey Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall 1674–1729*, vol. 1 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 41.

⁶¹ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 26–27, 149–50. On the concern about these groups in old England, see McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior*, 5, 12–13, 80–92.

especially common coasters, unprofitable fowlers, and tobacco takers.”⁶² The law and its officers were given the authority to oversee both family governors and their subordinates.

Others who fell outside family government and failed to attend to their callings were also suspect. Vagabonds, or those who “wander from their families, relations and dwelling places, from town to town,” were seen as a danger because they had no community ties and were believed to draw dependents and others away from their work. These people were to be apprehended by the constables when they were found and if they could not “give a good and satisfactory account of such their wandering up and down” were to be sent back to their place of official residence. Sailors who arrived at the Boston wharves similarly lacked formal connection to the community and had a propensity to excessive drinking that made them a risk for disorder. Other strangers who arrived in the port town were also free from community regulation by their lack of community affiliation and were to be strictly monitored by the constables and magistrates. To be sure that newly arrived people understood the laws governing their presence in the town, rules governing strangers were to be “posted upon the doors or posts of the meetinghouses and other public places in all the port towns” and constables were to inform all ships of the laws before their passengers were allowed to disembark.⁶³ Meetinghouse doors served as seventeenth-century message boards and notices posted there would have been visual cues for inhabitants that important information was being communicated. Indians were a social group that attracted particular attention and were always defined as outsiders even when they were not strangers or outside the bounds of family government. Some lived in English families

⁶² Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 66.

⁶³ Whitmore, 81, 134, 143–44, 152–53. On warning out strangers and the poor, see Cornelia H. Dayton and Sharon V. Salinger, *Robert Love’s Warnings: Searching for Strangers in Colonial Boston* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

as servants and slaves, some worked as translators or couriers, but they were always outside the community. Indians represented a military threat as well as a moral one that made them suspicious to surveillance officers and Bostonians were prohibited from selling or providing them weapons, alcohol, or watercraft.⁶⁴ Suspicious people—those who lacked community ties, those who were unlikely to be subject to informal regulation, or those who evaded patriarchal family government—received increased attention from law enforcement officials because their presence threatened to create disorder and also threatened the reputation of the town.

Watching officers extended surveillance of those about whom gossip was unlikely to reach official ears and to times and places not easily observed by reputable, respectable people. Officers who watched at night and during the Sabbath ensured, or tried to ensure, that there were no times when misdeeds might be free from observation and extended watchfulness to groups that may have otherwise fallen outside of church watchfulness regimes, including servants, the poor, the unchurched, sailors, youths, vagrants, and Indians. The night watch kept eyes on the street after the constable's bell rang, when all obedient godly families should have retreated to their homes. Those left outside without good reason were outside family government and civil authorities needed to step into the void.

The places subject to particular attention by the constables and other watching officers were those in which chance observation was unlikely and family government was evaded. Some spaces were not suspicious in and of themselves but were made so by the people who occupied them or the times in which people were found there. Others were always considered disorderly and people were made suspect by their presence within. These settings were suspect in their

⁶⁴ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 75–78; Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), chaps. 3, 4; Grandjean, *American Passage*, chap. 2; Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016), chaps. 4, 5.

concealment, were prone to disorder, and were only witnessed by those who would not report disorderly behavior to authorities. Although women could be found in them, the spaces that received particular attention—ordinaries and taverns, wharves, warehouses, and dark streets—were largely male-gendered spaces where reputable women were unlikely to be found.

Women's mobility during the day, their economic and social networks, and their access to intimate household spaces gave them opportunities to observe their neighbors and share information in times and places where men may not have been present. Law enforcement officers in effect created a parallel, male-centered surveillance regime that served both to guard against external threats such as military invasion and internal threats from ungoverned people. Although constables and watchmen created a supplement to patriarchal household government, that effect may have been mitigated by the ways they used talk and gossip to assist their efforts at surveillance. Constables and watchmen could warn people back to their homes but they could not apprehend someone merely on suspicion. They needed reliable evidence, which was either to be had through their own observation or "by present information from others." Word of mouth information, then, was considered sufficient to detain someone but a hunch was not. Like the practice of paying informants, the constable's office organized gossip that could be disorderly and provided a focal point for information about malefactors and troublemakers.

The effect of all this official and unofficial watching theoretically ensured that no suspicious times, places, or people went unobserved. In practice, however, the authority and effectiveness of official watchers was limited by many who resisted serving and many others who opposed the watchers' authority. Watching officers were out at night, largely unsupervised, and could themselves create or participate in disorderly activity. Unlike the constables who were appointed to their office for a year at a time, the watch was supposed to be a duty born by all

qualified men in turn. As appointed officials, constables were meant to be particularly respectable, upstanding members of the community. This was not true of the watch, which every male member of the community between the ages of sixteen and sixty was expected to perform at some point. So many men resisted service as watchers that the court levied fines on those who refused. As time went on, some expressed resentment about the number of men who were able to claim exemptions from the watch, and the General Court issued an order that only magistrates, church elders, and sworn officers were released from the duty. These refusals and exemptions persisted throughout the seventeenth century and show that, contrary to popular imagination, New England's puritans were not eager pry into their neighbors' lives and activities if it meant inconvenience or loss of sleep. Boston residents also seem to have resented the watch's intrusion into their activities, as evinced by convictions and whippings meted out for "abusing the watch."⁶⁵

Fears that constables' authority would be defied was based in experience. This was a common enough problem in old England and the tradition continued in Massachusetts. Numerous men were cited for "abusing" constables in the execution of their office. Some attacked the staff as a symbol of the office and others disrespected the constables' authority, spoke rudely to them, or threatened them.⁶⁶ These threats against the constables could make

⁶⁵ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 61–62, 65; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1853, 1:99, 293; Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 1853, 2:23, 151; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:67, 75; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:4; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 154–55; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 9; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:264–65; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:720.

⁶⁶ For examples of people resisting constables' authority, sometimes with violence, see *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:22, 26, 257; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:867, 884, 1015, 1017, 1153; *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 1678–1680*, vol. 7 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1919), 246–47; Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 751. See also Cynthia B. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68–70; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 64. Konig has argued that resistance was due in part to a "failure to impose order in the first generation." Konig, *Law and Society*, 119.

some officials reluctant to confront or pursue the disorder they observed unless it was egregious.⁶⁷ One can only imagine the conflicting feelings in a community when a constable was diligent about his duties and refused to overlook transgressions by his neighbors.⁶⁸ Overly thorough constables drew reproach not only from criminals who defied them but also from magistrates who feared that an “overzealous” constable would incite further resistance to their authority. One constable was admonished by magistrates for pursuing a drunken French sailor into his lodgings and confining him the stocks even though the sailor was not causing any disruption or disturbing the peace. The community’s concern was with widespread or threatening disorder, not occasional drunkenness by a stranger, and the constable’s duty was to minimize disorder rather than create it. Magistrates needed to tread lightly in their correction of malefactors, however, or risk undermining the authority of their law enforcement apparatus. In this case, the magistrates opted to reprimand the constable in private, “lest they should have discouraged and discountenanced an honest officer, and given occasion to the offenders and their abettors to insult over him.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 217.

⁶⁸ On the conflict between enforcement and neighborliness among English constables, see Wrightson, “Two Concepts of Order,” 29–31. On difficulties in enforcing moral regulating in Massachusetts, see Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly*, 123. Because constables were members of the community they policed, their personal loyalties or other factors could interfere with fulfilling their duties. See, for example, John Toleman being presented for “neglect of his duty” to raise a hue and cry. *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:956. See also Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 64. There is some disagreement about the status of men chosen as constables. McManus wrote that the colony made sure that “only substantial citizens were chosen” by setting a minimum property requirement. Konig, on the other hand, argued that constables were often ill-treated “because of their low status” and that “men of substance were rarely chosen to serve as constables.” McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 61; Konig, *Law and Society*, 119. It is outside the scope of this study to investigate the estates and statuses of those chosen.

⁶⁹ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 532–34. For a summary of the case, see McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 59.

The reverse of the fervid constable was the permissive one who ignored or even participated in disorderly behavior.⁷⁰ When a constable and his assistant in Lynn were violently attacked with sticks and had a pair of scissors thrown at them, the assailants were fined but perhaps not as much as they might have been if the constable had not also been convicted of serving the warrant while drunk.⁷¹ In the 1670s, a constable was accused of using a fraudulent warrant to break open and steal from several warehouses.⁷² There is also some evidence that constables could be less than thorough in their scrutiny of the community when looking the other way suited their needs. Among the laws made to thwart Quakers was a provision that informers be rewarded for reporting “constables neglecting their duty in not faithfully executing” the statutes, perhaps indicating a fear that some of the appointed officials had sympathies with the blasphemers.⁷³ People found misspending their time in ordinaries were sometimes the very people entrusted with keeping the peace and with so much simultaneous surveillance it is not surprising that occasionally the watchers found themselves watched. In 1678, three tithingmen in Essex County found two constables drinking and smoking at an ordinary during their Sabbath evening rounds and also observed the same constables ignoring a drunk man who passed them on the road.⁷⁴

There was even more danger of disorder with the night watch since the men were unsupervised and abroad at night and the duty of watch was not limited to respectable

⁷⁰ English experience indicated that constables might not be as conscientious in their duties as the magistrates and ministers hoped. English constables were usually chosen from the lower ranks of the community and knew that their office could put them in conflict with neighbors and “social betters,” and they often found it expedient to ignore transgressions rather than aggressively pursue them. Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 191–92.

⁷¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 3:459–61.

⁷² *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:385–86.

⁷³ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 234.

⁷⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 7:110–11.

householders.⁷⁵ Mischief was not unknown among the watchmen. One way of mitigating disorder during the watch was to make sure that no watch could “consist of all or the greater part of youths, but that able men be joined with them, that the watch be a sufficient watch.” When they walked the town in pairs, the law required that “a youth always joined with an elder and more sober person.” The town also decreed that the watchmen’s own character needed to be “exemplary” because their duty was “to see to the regulating of other men actions and manners.” Watchmen should not “us[e] any unclean or corrupt language, nor unmannerly or unbeseeming terms unto any, but that they behave themselves so that any person of quality, or strangers that are upon occasion abroad late, may acknowledge that our watch neglects not due examination, nor offers any just cause of provocation.” The night watchmen were to be careful not to cause disturbances in their investigations. They should “make discreet inquiry” if they saw any lights or “if they hear any noise or disorderly carriage in any house” after ten at night and “demand a reason of it.” If there “appear a real disorder, that men are dancing, drinking, singing vainly,” the watch should “admonish them to cease,” but if the disorder continued then the watchmen were to inform the constable.⁷⁶ Putting private citizens in charge of surveillance therefore carried dangers of both “overzealousness” and laxity, or even moral degeneracy, but most probably fulfilled their duties to some degree, pacing the town during the required hours and investigating only egregious disorder that threatened the peace of the community.

Despite this web of sacred and secular watchfulness, people still managed to evade detection or reporting to authorities by those who would put a stop to the behavior. At least some of that lack of reporting was surely due to informal efforts at reform, but it also shows that

⁷⁵ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 194–95.

⁷⁶ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 151; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 8–9; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 1:83.

despite extensive efforts to extend watchfulness into all the dark corners and secret spaces of Boston, seventeenth-century inhabitants were not the eager busybodies of popular conception and there were times and places that remained unwatched. Still, the use of these watching officers trained ordinary Bostonians to see and recognize disorder, and to understand the common benefit of a well-ordered community. The surveillance apparatus in seventeenth-century Boston formalized watchfulness in the temporal realm, extended it beyond godly church members to times and places in which informal surveillance was ineffective, and disciplined gossip as an imperative to good order and public safety.

“that others may hear and be ashamed”⁷⁷
Public Display and Public Punishment

While law enforcement and civic watchfulness aimed to prevent disorderly people and activities from going undetected, public punishment directed the community’s gaze toward those convicted of lawbreaking. These punishments took watchfulness to their most extreme, forcing the community to look at criminals and see their transgressions, sometimes literally written on their bodies. While public punishment turned criminals into objects of display, those criminals were also members of the community who were made into examples of the dangers of criminality and whose reputations were shaped and perpetuated by the punishments. The spaces where punishments were meted out were also shaped by the display of criminal bodies. These were public, highly trafficked locations that ensured the entire community could witness the punished person’s shame. And unless the person was banished or executed, they would have to

⁷⁷ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 45.

continue living in the community in which they had been shamed, every day facing the people whose staring eyes they had seen from the stocks, pillory, or scaffold.⁷⁸

Magistrates had a choice of punishments much more extensive than church leaders could impose. In England church courts imposed corporal punishments but in New England churches could impose only spiritual and social punishments. Civil authorities, however, could and did punish the body.⁷⁹ The most frequently deployed penalty was a fine, but other punishments served a dual purpose of deterring others from similar behavior and cementing the reputation of the criminal through bodily display and humiliation. By inflicting punishment in public spaces, Massachusetts officials ensured that witnesses would have the criminal's transgression impressed upon their memory just as it was impressed upon the criminal's body.⁸⁰ Those who did not directly witness the punishments would likely have heard about the punishments through gossip, which further spread the criminal's reputation throughout the community. The punished body became a way of sharing information and the punishments were performed in times and places that ensured visibility to the greatest number of people.⁸¹ These punishments brought shame and disgrace on the offender by displaying their failings before the community, meaning that in the future the offender would daily encounter those who had witnessed their shame. Misdeeds that they likely attempted to conceal were advertised before the assembled witnesses to their punishment, extending the reach of watchfulness beyond those who had witnessed the crime to

⁷⁸ On uses of shame in punishment in early modern England, see David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday, *Cultures of Shame: Exploring Crime and Morality in Britain 1600–1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), chaps. 1–2.

⁷⁹ Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," 1225; McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 167, 171.

⁸⁰ Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 122–23.

⁸¹ Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 101–2.

envelop the community at large, who watched the punishment and whose watching was itself part of the punishment.⁸²

Corporal punishment was often imposed when an offender could or would not pay a fine, effectively allowing criminals with means to buy their way out of humiliation. Lower status people were therefore far more likely to be punished corporally and publicly shamed. This marked the criminalized body as not only sinful but also low status. Those who could not pay their way out of corporal punishment could have their desire for a lesser sentence supported by those with higher social standing, as when Job Lane petitioned to have his servant Ebedmelecke's whipping remitted after being convicted of running away and stealing.⁸³ Lane's efforts could have been an expression of sympathy or humanity, but the ubiquity of corporal punishment for servants makes it more likely that he did not want to lose his servant's labor during any needed convalescence.⁸⁴ The fines more commonly levied on higher status offenders were also punishments that could be remitted, sometimes long after the sentence was passed. Full or partial remission of sentences was exceedingly common.⁸⁵ Corporal punishment could be reduced or set aside but once performed it could not be remitted. Because lower status people were more likely to be subjected to corporal punishment, they were also more likely to suffer the

⁸² Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 122; Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," 1226. Nash and Kilday note that the use of shaming punishments assumed a "powerful and coherent" community that shared values and were able to isolate an offender. Nash and Kilday, *Cultures of Shame*, 70.

⁸³ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:306; 4, part 1:137.

⁸⁴ Jules Zanger, "Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (1965): 474.

⁸⁵ Zanger, 471–74; Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 204–11.

full weight of their sentences and more likely to have their guilt displayed before the watchful eyes of the community.⁸⁶

For those not fortunate enough to be able to pay a fine, or for those who committed crimes seen as particularly threatening to the moral and legal order of the jurisdiction, punishment could be inflicted in a spectacle of public penance where the ignominy of the offense was written on the body of the offender and their disrepute performed in punishment rituals.⁸⁷ Inflicting punishment in public could cement reputation or spread gossip about a crime and the criminal, making the crime and the criminal unavoidably visible to the entire community. This had the dual effects of shaming the transgressor and warning the community of what awaited them if they similarly failed.⁸⁸ Public punishment was sometimes coupled with marking the body of the criminal, with varying degrees of permanence. Despite the puritans' reputation for cruelty, moral exactitude, and unforgiving attitudes, none of these shaming punishments were puritan inventions. Variations on them can be found at least as far back as the Tudor period and most had been used much longer than that.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Zanger, "Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts," 476–77; McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 171.

⁸⁷ Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 122.

⁸⁸ Nash and Kilday, *Cultures of Shame*, 10.

⁸⁹ Alden Vaughan, ed., *The Puritan Tradition in America, 1620–1730*, Revised ed. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1972), xviii–xx. The literature on punishment in early modern England is vast. See, for example, Helen Carrel, "The Ideology of Punishment in Late Medieval English Towns," *Social History* 34 (2009): 301–20; Susan Dwyer Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meanings of Violence in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 1–34; Bruce Lenman, "The Limits of Godly Discipline in the Early Modern Period with Particular Reference to England and Scotland," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500–1800*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 124–45; George L. Haskins, "Ecclesiastical Antecedents of Criminal Punishments in Early Massachusetts," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 72 (October 1957): 21–35; Martin Ingram, "Shame and Pain: Themes and Variations in Tudor Punishments," in *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500–1900: Punishing the English*, ed. Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 36–62; Robert Shoemaker, "Streets of Shame? The Crowd and Public Punishments in London, 1700–1820," in *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500–1900: Punishing the English*, ed. Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 232–57; Dave Postles, "The Market Place as Space in Early Modern England," *Social History* 29 (2004): 41–58; Ingram, "Scolding Women Cucked or Washed"; Herrup, *Common Peace*, chap. 7.

If anything, New England authorities were more compassionate in their deployment of corporal punishments—limiting the maximum number of stripes in whippings, for instance, and ensuring time in the stocks would not lead to permanent injury. Public humiliation via confession, admonition, and corporal punishment were certainly not unique to puritan New England, and neither was the idea of “corporate responsibility towards the Almighty.” These had long roots in England, stretching back at least to the medieval church. What was different on the far side of the Atlantic was the way that covenant theology sanctioned community surveillance with religious imperatives that formalized the informal community participation which had made England’s system run. Watchfulness became not just an imperative for community peace, but for divine favor. Spectators who watched these shaming punishments were participants in the drive for communal salvation.⁹⁰ Both through watching others’ behavior and by watching their punishments, Massachusetts puritans sought to ensure God’s favor.

The most common corporal punishment was whipping.⁹¹ While clearly inflicting physical harm, whipping was not meant to impart permanent damage. When Massachusetts codified their laws in 1641, they hewed to the biblical injunction that specified a maximum of forty stripes, a departure from the English tradition that a criminal be whipped until he was bloody, and in practice thirty-nine stripes was the maximum and given to only the most serious offenders.⁹² Usually the number of prescribed stripes was much lower or was left unspecified

⁹⁰ Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 153; Shoemaker, “Streets of Shame,” 235; Lenman, “Limits of Godly Discipline”; Herrup, *Common Peace*, esp. 65; Howard Schweber, “Ordering Principles: The Adjudication of Criminal Cases in Puritan Massachusetts, 1629–1650,” *Law and Society Review* 32 (1998): 400–402.

⁹¹ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 168; Bradley Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606–1660* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 53.

⁹² Deuteronomy 25:2-3, “And it shall be, if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number. Forty stripes he may give him, and not exceed: lest, if he should exceed, and beat him above these with many stripes, then thy brother should seem vile unto thee.” See Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 153; Chapin,

and presumably at the discretion of the constable to determine how many constituted a “severe” whipping. These whippings were administered in public, heavily trafficked places where a whipping post had been erected for that purpose. Often the whipping was administered immediately after court adjourned for the day when those transacting business there would have still been in the area to observe. Other times the whipping was set to be done on the following lecture day, again at a time and place when many passersby would have witnessed the punishment. In Boston whippings were administered at the town house or market place, which was directly across the street from First Church’s meetinghouse.⁹³ By performing punishments in public, highly trafficked places associated with authority, Boston and other locales maximized the number of witnesses and associated the criminal’s shame with civil power.

Whipping was reserved for the punishment of those below the status of gentleman “unless his crime be very shameful, and his course of life vicious and profligate.”⁹⁴ In fact, many of those sentenced to be whipped were servants convicted of running away, stealing, or showing disrespect to their masters.⁹⁵ These whippings would have discouraged recidivism and also warned other servants against disobedient or disorderly behavior. Other whippings must have served as warnings to the community as much as shaming of the individual. In particular, men who were whipped for inappropriate sexual behavior would have been visibly identified before the community as unsafe and immoral. Thomas Boyse was sentenced to be whipped for

Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606–1660, 53. For an example, see *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:24.

⁹³ In Plymouth the disciplinary apparatus, including the whipping post, were located on the town common near the meetinghouse. The common was not adjacent to the meetinghouses in Boston but the town house was centrally located. Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 126.

⁹⁴ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 48.

⁹⁵ A small sample includes Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:81, 86, 88, 90, 100, 112, 154, 172, 246, 268, 298, 300, 334.

attempted rape, Mathew Edwards for “putting his hand under a girls coat,” and John Pope for “his unchaste attempt upon a girl, and dalliance with maids.”⁹⁶ John Bickerstaffe was to be severely whipped for fornication with Alice Burwood, who was herself sentenced to be whipped for “yielding to Bickerstaffe without crying out, and concealing it 9 or 10 days.”⁹⁷ Jonathan Thing was to be severely whipped at Boston and at Ipswich for “ravishing Mary Greefield.”⁹⁸ Those who observed these punishments could have passed information on to others that the punished person was unsafe. It was not only men who were whipped for scandalous crimes. One can only imagine the talk in Boston after Mary Osborn was whipped for “giving her husband quick silver, and other abuses”⁹⁹ Whipping could also be inflicted when a capital crime was suspected but could not be proved. An Indian woman was accused of killing another but there was insufficient evidence to convict her of “willful murder.” She escaped execution but the court sentenced her to be whipped with ten stripes because it was a great crime and they wanted to instill “terror to others, to prevent the like practices for the time to come.”¹⁰⁰

Sometimes whipping was combined with other forms of bodily display.¹⁰¹ The practice of displaying the body of the criminal in public before the community invited shame and humiliation while not causing physical harm. Various implements were used for this purpose, including the stocks, pillory, or bilboes. The primary difference among these devices was the extent to which the offender was restrained and the posture into which they were forced. Bilboes

⁹⁶ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:249, 269, 287.

⁹⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:246.

⁹⁸ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:317.

⁹⁹ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:334.

¹⁰⁰ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:395.

¹⁰¹ John Noble, *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay 1630–1692*, vol. 2 (Boston: County of Suffolk, 1904), 6; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:442–43.

used an iron bar and shackles to restrain the criminal by the ankles. These were soon replaced by stocks, which restrained the offender in a seated position and used hinged boards to secure the feet and sometimes the hands and head as well. The pillory was similar to the stocks, but the body was secured in a standing position by the arms and attached to a pole and had a crossbeam that allowed some of the most egregious crimes to be punished by nailing the offenders ear to them.¹⁰²

These punishments were meant primarily to inflict psychic rather than physical pain and in fact the magistrates tried to ensure that offenders would not be physically harmed by their time in the stocks.¹⁰³ Many sentences passed during colder months include the proviso that they be performed “if the weather be moderate” or “when the weather is seasonable.”¹⁰⁴ This would have increased the number of people on the street and therefore allowed more people to view the punishment, but at least one law indicates that it was for the safety of the offender. In the laws on inn-keepers, magistrates noted that anyone who “offends in excessive or long drinking” should be put in the stocks for three hours “when the weather may not hazard his life or limbs.”¹⁰⁵ Although the stocks, pillory, and bilboes punished the body, the real effect was meant to come from the body’s display before the community and the resulting psychic injury of shame as well as the edifying message to others who witnessed the offender’s humiliation. Locating these restraining devices in the market place or near the meetinghouse also ensured the greatest visibility since these were public spaces that would have been frequented by large numbers of

¹⁰² McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 167–68.

¹⁰³ Hirsch, “From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts,” 1225, 1232.

¹⁰⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:283; 3:37; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:138, 158, 182, 380.

¹⁰⁵ Hirsch, “From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts,” 1226n236; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 82.

inhabitants.¹⁰⁶ Transgressions that resulted in exhibition punishments varied, so the infamy from being put in the stocks did not mark a person as a particular kind of offender. Some were set in the stocks for drunkenness or violating the Sabbath, others for “uncleanness,” fighting, stealing, forgery, or slander. Often this punishment seems to have resulted when evidence did not permit conviction for a crime that would have carried a more severe punishment or because the criminal showed remorse.¹⁰⁷

In all of these punishments, the times and locations in which criminals were displayed encouraged maximum visibility and ensured that communities affected by the crimes were able to participate in the punishment and that the community’s judgement, and the criminal’s shame, were part of the punishment. Some offenders were sentenced to sit in stocks or bilboes or be whipped on multiple days or in multiple locations.¹⁰⁸ A more dramatic way of maximizing visibility in the community was by tying the culprit to the back of a cart and leading them through the town streets while being whipped. This was also an English tradition and may have been a variation on the old English practice of “riding” a criminal through town on a horse, sometimes backward facing the animal’s tail, through the “most crowded thoroughfares and market places in order to ensure maximum exposure.”¹⁰⁹ Processional punishments were only

¹⁰⁶ Postles, “Market Place as Space,” 42–43.

¹⁰⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:99, 103, 105, 133, 193, 199, 248–49, 268, 269, 287; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1630–1644*, 2:74, 121, 134; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:8, 88, 170; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:886, 943.

¹⁰⁸ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:135, 233; 2:243; 4, part 2:156; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:332; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:886.

¹⁰⁹ Ingram, “Shame and Pain,” 40. Carting resembles in some ways the English processional “rough justice” rituals like skimmington rides, which spread information about family disorder while imposing community discipline on family government. These rituals seem to not have been common in New England but a few clues suggest processional rituals were still practiced. Only one example of procession as rough justice appears in the public court record for Boston in this period, in which a man was taken “upon a pole and by violence” carried from the North End to the town dock “which occasioned a great tumult of people.” The man was rescued by the constable and the perpetrators were taken to court, where they justified their actions by claiming that the victim “was an interloper and had never served his time to the trade of a Ship carpenter and now came to work in their yard.” This procession most resembles tradition of “riding the stang” from Northern England and Scotland, perhaps

used in Massachusetts Bay for crimes that were especially hazardous to the public peace or carried the threat of ensnaring others into like offenses. Often this meant Quakers.¹¹⁰ A law against Quakers passed in 1661 ordered that Quakers should be “stripped naked from the middle upwards, and tied to a cart’s tail, and whipped through the town, and from thence immediately conveyed to the constable of the next town towards the borders of our jurisdiction...and so from constable to constable until they be conveyed through any the outwardmost towns of our jurisdiction.”¹¹¹ The infrequency of this punishment meant that constables had to “impress cart, oxen, and other assistants” to carry out the sentences and the following year the law was modified to limit the whipping to three towns.¹¹² The law punishing Quakers with carting was put into action immediately, however—the same year it was passed, Judah Brown, Peter Peirson, Wendlocke Christopherson, and “all the Quakers now in prison” were sentenced to be whipped at a cart’s tail to the borders of the colony.¹¹³

reflecting the heritage of the ship builders. Another case hints that informal shaming may have still been practiced in ways that did not always come to official attention. William and Martha Beale were subjected to something resembling rough music twice, first when Martha was accused of bigamy and very publicly berated as a “baud” and “base jade” at her front door. The second time, just months later, two men came to the Beale house “besetting it with clubs” and calling out to William to “come out you cuckoldly curr: we are come to beat thee: thou livest in adultery” in response to suspicion that Martha was having an affair with their lodger. *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:602; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:269–71, 282. See also E.P. Thompson, “Rough Music Reconsidered,” *Folklore* 103 (1992): 4–5; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1993), chap. 8; Emily Claire Kolmodin Romeo, “The Virtuous and Violent Women of Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 84; Martha Porter Saxton, “Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1989), 72; Martin Ingram, “Ridings, Rough Music and the ‘Reform of Popular Culture’ in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present* 105 (1984): 79–113; Underdown, “Taming of the Scold,” 127–36; David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 100–103, 110–12; Nash and Kilday, *Cultures of Shame*, chap. 2.

¹¹⁰ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 169.

¹¹¹ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 62.

¹¹² Whitmore, 63; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:59.

¹¹³ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:20, 24.

The only other crime for which carting was the explicitly designated punishment was that of keeping a brothel. In 1672, Boston was repeatedly vexed by the presence of Alice Thomas and her bawdy house. Thomas was convicted of breaking into and stealing from warehouses and ships, breaking Sabbath laws, and most scandalous, keeping an unlicensed house of entertainment in which she offered “frequent and unseasonable entertainment in her house to lewd lascivious and notorious persons of both sexes, giving them opportunity to commit carnal wickedness”; in short, she was “by common fame...a common baud.” Thomas was sentenced to be taken from the prison to the gallows where she would stand for one hour with a rope around her neck, then taken back to prison, and then taken to her house and “brought out of the gate or foredoor strip’t to the waist, and there tied to a cart’s tail, and so to be whip’t through the street to the prison with not under thirty-nine stripes, and there in prison to remain.”¹¹⁴ This ritual procession marked her house as a site of criminality and made sure that those who lived or travelled through her neighborhood would be confronted with the community’s denunciation of her activities. Some months later the court passed a law which codified the punishment that Thomas had suffered, declaring that any person who “shall presume to set up or keep any such house wherein such wicked lusts may be nourished and whoredom committed” should be severely whipped with thirty stripes at a cart’s tail “through the streets where such offence or offences hath been committed” and then kept in prison with “hard fare and hard labor.” At least once a week the imprisonment, the “said baud and her accomplices” were to be marched through town tied to a hand cart, wearing “hair frocks and blue caps,” and “forced along to draw all the filth laid upon the cart through the streets to the seaside, going to the gallows in Suffolk, and in

¹¹⁴ *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:83.

all other counties where the court of each shire shall appoint.”¹¹⁵ The symbolism of the baud’s procession was enhanced by the association of the crime with filth and with attire that suggested the ritual of penance.

In the 1670s and 1680s, Massachusetts Bay increasingly imposed carting for crimes that were not particularly heinous but rather those that warranted publicly ejecting the offender from the jurisdiction.¹¹⁶ In 1677, John Smith was to be whipped out of town at a cart’s tail after being imprisoned for living idly, “giving no account of his business here, but rendering himself suspicious both in his words and carriages.”¹¹⁷ In 1674/5, Mary Hawkins was sentenced to be whipped at a cart’s tail “up from the dwelling house of John Hall in Boston formerly Ezekiel Fogg’s lodging into the town round about the town house and so to the prison” for “bold whorish carriages and having a bastard child and impudent and pernicious lying.”¹¹⁸ (Ezekiel Fogg, the man with whom she committed the “wanton lascivious and obscene carriages” and who fathered her child, was given a fine.¹¹⁹) Three years later, Ellinor May was sentenced to be “tied to a cart’s tail and whipped upon her naked body from the prison to the place of her abode” and then banished from Boston after being convicted of whoredom and having a “bastard child.”¹²⁰ It was common for both men and women to be stripped to the waist before being whipped but this would have been particularly shameful for women and perhaps added a note of prurience to the watchfulness that accompanied their punishment. The route taken by the cart varied according to

¹¹⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:513.

¹¹⁶ On banishment more generally, see Goodman, *Banished*.

¹¹⁷ *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:844.

¹¹⁸ *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:558.

¹¹⁹ *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:558.

¹²⁰ John Noble, *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay 1630–1692*, vol. 1 (Boston: County of Suffolk, 1901), 138.

the offender. Elinor May and others were whipped beginning at their own houses. Mary Hawkins's procession began at the former home of her baby's father, which expanded publicity of the punishment to his former neighbors and perhaps the people who observed their illicit behavior.

Public, corporal punishment took watchfulness to its most extreme. The community was encouraged to train their gaze on the criminal and see the potential consequences of unruly behavior. Criminals were punished in locations and at times when the number of eyes on them would have been maximized, such as lecture, market, or court days, and in ways that drew attention to their offences. New England's puritans did not invent these punishments but they did use them in ways that bolstered their commitment to a holy commonwealth. By disciplining criminal bodies, Massachusetts Bay also disciplined the ways they were perceived. This was especially true when authorities punished transgressions not just by displaying a criminal but also by marking their bodies in either temporary or permanent ways.

“their faults written in their foreheads”¹²¹
Marking the Criminal Body

Displaying a criminal in the stocks did not necessarily identify the person with a particular crime, though their conviction would certainly have been orally published to the witnesses. Some crimes, however, were associated with particular ways of marking the body of the criminal with varying degrees of permanence. Visual cues advertised the criminal's transgressions, either symbolically or literally, helping spread information about the crimes to even those who were only passing by as the punishment was being performed. The most

¹²¹ *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 1680–1683*, vol. 8 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1921), 300.

obvious way to convey information about a person's crime was by pinning a paper to the stocks or to the body of the convict that detailed their crime. New England did not invent this punishment, which had been used to "advertise" the criminal's transgressions in England and was increasingly used during and after the Tudor period when higher literacy rates made it more efficacious.¹²² In Massachusetts, where the written word carried considerable force and literacy was a religious imperative, posting signs on or near the offender helped spread information about the crimes that warranted the punishment, warning others about the consequences of such a crime.

Certain crimes carried this punishment according to law. This was the designated punishment for anyone convicted of defacing public records, a conviction of which was to carry the sentence of a fine, two months imprisonment, or standing "in the pillory two hours in Boston market, with a paper over his head in capital letters, A DEFACER OF RECORDS."¹²³ After 1646, anyone who "shall contemptuously behave himself toward the word preached, or the messengers thereof called to dispense the same in any congregation, when he doth faithfully execute his service and office therein" upon a second offence would be either fined or "stand two hours openly upon a block 4 foot high, on a lecture day, with a paper fixed on his breast, with this, A WANTON GOSPELLER, written in capital letters." The law was explicit about the rationale for this punishment: "that others may fear and be ashamed of breaking out into the like wickedness"¹²⁴ The purpose of posting papers was thus made very clear: not only to mark the criminal, but also to act as a deterrent to others who would want to avoid similar shame. In the same year, the colony declared that any on who "shall contemptuously behave himself, towards the word

¹²² Ingram, "Shame and Pain," 41.

¹²³ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:263.

¹²⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:179.

preached, or the messengers thereof...either by interrupting him in his preaching, or by charging him falsely with any error, which he hath not taught in the open face of the church,” for a second offence would either pay a large fine or “stand two hours openly upon a block or stool, four foot high, on a lecture day, with a paper fixed on his breast, written in capital letters, AN OPEN AND OBSTINATE CONTEMNER OF GODS HOLY ORDINANCES, that others may hear and be ashamed of breaking out into the like wickedness.”¹²⁵

Other crimes were occasionally punished in this way though the punishments were not specifically prescribed in law for those particular crimes. At various times papers were affixed to criminals on the pillory or in the stocks for crimes as diverse as house breaking, slandering high-ranking colonists, reviling one’s parents, and suborning witnesses.¹²⁶ On some occasions, the papers advertised a particular incident, such as when a paper reading “A SLANDERER OF MR. ZEROBABELL ENDICOTT” was pinned to Elizabeth Hulett’s forehead, rather than labeling the person as perpetrator of more generalized criminal behavior.¹²⁷ This not only labeled the offender as a slanderer but notified any who heard the spurious words that they were untrue. In March 1674, the constables of both Salem and Beverly were charged with ensuring that the public punishment of Hannah Gray was carried out at the meetinghouses on lecture day in their respective towns. She was to stand “with a paper on her head on which was written in capital letters, I STAND HERE FOR MY LASCIVIOUS AND WANTON CARRIAGES.”¹²⁸ Gray had been convicted based on numerous testimonies, including those of neighbors who observed her

¹²⁵ Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 44–45.

¹²⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:18; Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records 1642–1673*, 3:153; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:231.

¹²⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:380.

¹²⁸ *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 1672–1674*, vol. 5 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1916), 291.

behavior and those who heard gossip about her penchant for “bawdy language and acts among the boys and girls.”¹²⁹ Labeling Gray as lascivious and wanton validated the opinions of those who testified against her and spread their judgments about her beyond the realm of gossip to include official judicial pronouncement.

Papers might be hung on the pillory next to the criminal, or they could be pinned on the person’s clothing or head. The location of the shaming also varied but it was always a place that ensured maximum publicity, usually either the market place at a busy time or outside the meetinghouse after lecture. The market place was a frequent site for these punishments throughout the seventeenth century and the criminal was made to stand “upon a block or stool of two foot high” to make sure they were set apart from the crowd.¹³⁰ The meetinghouse was also a common site for this punishment. In some towns the person would stand at the meetinghouse door. If any who passed by them while entering the meetinghouse for lecture were unaware of the crimes, surely they would have inquired of others and thereby spread word of the specific offences that led to this punishment.¹³¹ The Essex County courts sometimes sentenced transgressors to stand with their papers inside the meetinghouse itself, even for crimes like tipping or burglary that were not ecclesiastical in nature.¹³² Other times the shaming took place at the whipping post or other place associated with criminal punishment. When the court suspected that one criminal would not quietly acquiesce to his punishment by standing “quietly

¹²⁹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:291.

¹³⁰ For examples, see Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:284; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1673–1692*, 1:10; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:302; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:697.

¹³¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:239–40.

¹³² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:36; *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 1675–1678*, vol. 6 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1917), 265.

with his back to the post,” they directed the constable to “bind him to it.”¹³³ This indicates that those punished in the marketplace or meetinghouse stood unbound to anything but their shame and were expected to bear their punishment obediently.

While standing with papers was a way of advertising details of a criminal’s transgressions, sometimes the crime was so common that the courts could accomplish the same with an abbreviation. Such was the case in 1636, when William Perkins was made to stand “at the next General Court one hour in public view, with a white sheet of paper on his breast, having a great D made upon it” symbolizing his conviction for drunkenness.¹³⁴ Perkins’s shaming was to last only an hour, but some were made to wear letters for much longer. John Davies was convicted of “gross offences in attempting lewdness with divers women” and censured to be whipped and “wear the letter V upon his breast upon his uppermost garment until the court do discharge him.”¹³⁵ He wore the V for six months.¹³⁶ Robert Coles had been convicted of drunkenness at least twice before the court found him guilty of “abusing himself shamefully with drink, enticing John Shotswell[’s] wife to incontinency, and other misdemeanors” in 1633. He had previously been fined and ordered to make a public confession, but this time he was sentenced to stand “with a white sheet of paper on his back, wherein a drunkard shall be written in great letters, and to stand therewith so long as the court thinks meet.” After coming to court again for drunkenness the following year, he was told to “hang upon his outward garment, a D, made of red cloth, and set upon white; to continue this for a year, and not to leave it off at any time when he comes amongst company.” In case there was any confusion or he attempted to

¹³³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:185–86.

¹³⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:172.

¹³⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:248.

¹³⁶ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:269.

mitigate the effects of the sentence, he was told “to wear the D outwards.” He was allowed to remove the D two months later.¹³⁷

Some symbols of criminal activity did not require literacy. In the early decades of English settlement, Massachusetts Bay sometimes forced a criminal convicted of a speech crime to stand in a public place with their tongue in a cleft stick for some period of time. This unpleasant punishment involved having the tongue tied to the stick, which held the mouth open and distended the tongue.¹³⁸ This punishment symbolically silenced criminal speech. Transgressions that led to gagging included swearing, railing, reviling, lying, and blasphemy, and both men and women were given this sentence.¹³⁹ John Winthrop recorded the gagging of Mary Oliver in his journal for “reproaching the elders” in 1646.¹⁴⁰ Sometimes gagging was combined with other punishments, as when George Dill was convicted of both drunkenness and lying and was sentenced to stand “at the meetinghouse door next lecture day, with a cleft stick upon his tongue, and a paper upon his hat subscribed for gross premeditated lying.”¹⁴¹ The cleft stick punishment resembled in some ways the scold’s bridle used in old England, which the General Court tried to implement in 1672 with a law which ordered that “evil practice of sundry persons by exhorbitancy of the tongue in railing and scolding” should be punished by gagging or “set in a ducking stool and dipped over head and ears three times, in some convenient place of

¹³⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:90, 93, 107, 112, 118.

¹³⁸ McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England*, 168.

¹³⁹ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:177, 313; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1630–1644*, 2:74; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:99. For more on punishment for speech crimes, see Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64–65, 95, 102–3, 134–36, 157, 184.

¹⁴⁰ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 275–76.

¹⁴¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:15.

fresh or salt water.”¹⁴² There is no evidence that this punishment was ever used in Boston, though the sentence of ducking was passed at least once in Springfield.¹⁴³

For those whose crimes were severe but fell short of the standard of proof for execution, many were subjected to what Jane Kamensky has called a “symbolic execution.”¹⁴⁴ These criminals were made to stand on the gallows wearing a noose around their necks for a period of some hours as punishment for crimes such as suspected or attempted adultery, buggery, and assault. Typically, the convict would be sent to stand on the gallows for an hour with a rope around their neck and the end thrown over the gallows in a simulated hanging, which is consistent with convictions for crimes that fell just short of the threshold for capital punishment. Teagu Ocrimi was convicted of attempting to bugger a cow and made to stand on the gallows with a halter; if he had succeeded, the sentence would have been death. John Betts was found not guilty of murdering his servant, but the evidence showed “great probability of his guilt of so bloody a fact” and so he also stood on the gallows with a rope. Elizabeth Hudson was found to have been “lying in bed with Peter Turpin,” which implied but did not prove the capital crime of adultery, and she was sentenced to stand in the gallows wearing a noose for a half hour before being taken to the marketplace to be whipped.¹⁴⁵ Not everyone punished this way expressed appropriate contrition. One woman so punished was seen to have “laughed on the gallows,” according to several witnesses.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:514; Ingram, “Scolding Women Cucked or Washed,” 58.

¹⁴³ Joseph H. Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts (1639–1702): The Pynchon Court Record* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 278.

¹⁴⁴ Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:335; 3:309; 4, part 2:408; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1630–1644*, 2:121; Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records 1642–1673*, 3:192–93.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:22.

Less frequently, a criminal would be sentenced to wear a rope or collar around their neck for an indeterminate period of time whenever they ventured away from home or into the public eye as way of both maximizing shame and warning others. Daniel Fairfield was found to have “had carnal knowledge of, and so, in a most vile and abominable manner, to have abused the tender body of Dorcas Humfrey from the age of 7 to 9 years, and Sara Humfrey, Dorcas’s younger sister” and to have done this “most usually...on the Lords days and lecture days.” His sentence was extensive. He was to be severely whipped at Boston on the next lecture day and “have one of his nostrils slit so high as may well be, and then to be seared” and this would be repeated at Salem. He was then to be confined to Boston neck and would be executed “if he be found at any time during his life to go out of Boston neck, that is, beyond the rails toward Roxbury, or beyond the low water mark.” He was also sentenced to “to wear a hempen rope about his neck, the end of it hanging out about two foot at least,” and if he was “found abroad without it” he would be executed.¹⁴⁷ Jenken Davies was convicted of abusing the same girl and was to be severely whipped at both Boston and Lynn and then confined to Lynn, where “he shall wear a hempen rope apparently about his neck during the pleasure of this court” and whipped if found without it. The efficacy of this sentence is shown by the petition submitted by Fairfield’s wife ten years later, asking that her husband be allowed to “lay the rope aside” after a decade.¹⁴⁸

Others who had received similar sentences also asked to be relieved. Edward Saunders was sentenced to “wear a rope about his neck openly, to be seen hanging down two foot long, to

¹⁴⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:12–13.

¹⁴⁸ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:13; Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 370–74. John Hudson was also convicted of abusing Dorcas Humfrey but was only sentenced to whipping at Boston and Salem. Dorcas Humfrey, the abused child, was to be “privately corrected by this court.” This may be the result of what Flaherty has identified as a requirement of informing on others, even when one was a victim of abuse. See Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 206–7. A variation on the rope sentence was the requirement that a convict wear an iron collar. See Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:177, 318.

continue during the court's pleasure" and to wear it any time he went more than forty rods from his house after being found "justly deserving a high and severe censure" for "abusing the body of Ruth Parsons." His sentence also included a severe whipping at Boston and at Watertown.¹⁴⁹ He was freed from the halter at his request seven months later after the court "having received some testimony of some good effect his punishment hath produced."¹⁵⁰ In 1670, William Stacey asked the Court of Assistants to "permit the badge of his iniquity to be taken off, viz the rope about his neck" because "his poor parents and masters family (which are guiltless) are afflicted by the remainder of his suffering." The court refused and ordered the constable of Charlestown to ensure "that it [his sentence] be performed in all respects and that on his neglect of wearing his rope on the outside of his clothes to take him and severely whip him according to law."¹⁵¹ The punishment was effective in perpetuating the shame of the crimes and warning others, but it also punished his family and household—and the court's unwillingness to lift the shame they suffered by association suggests this was an intended consequence of the punishment.

Recidivism could result in the infrequently used punishment of branding. An offhand comment in one Essex County deposition shows that a sense of invisible sin or undetected hypocrisy and degeneracy loomed over the consciousness of New Englanders. Israel Webster reported that he overheard John Teney's wife say that "if the best of men had all their faults written in their foreheads they would be ashamed."¹⁵² Branding resolved this fear by literally writing the faults of sinful men on their foreheads for all to see. Some habitual burglars were sentenced to be branded in the forehead with the letter B. The problem with using only one

¹⁴⁹ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:364.

¹⁵⁰ Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 3:389.

¹⁵¹ Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records 1642–1673*, 3:203.

¹⁵² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:300.

letter, however, was that it could be ambiguous and in at least one case a blasphemer was also given a B.¹⁵³ The mark left by a branding presumably advertised the person's criminal past to the community, protecting the community at large while also shaming the individual. In this way the branding could shape reputation, but sometimes it simply reflected it. When Robert Scarlett was sentenced to be branded with a T, he was already a "known thief."¹⁵⁴ Sometimes the sentence of branding did not specify a letter, but was to be carried out with "a hot iron," as in the case of Richard Hopkins who was branded on the cheek for selling weapons to Indians, and Nicholas Frost who was branded on the hand for theft, drunkenness, and fornication.¹⁵⁵ Branding was a way of exhibiting one's criminal past to everyone the person encountered in the future and extending the reach of gossip to any locale where the criminal might try to escape their reputation.¹⁵⁶ Like other corporal punishments, branding was inflicted publicly, sometimes during the court session itself.¹⁵⁷ This method of status-marking was used for other purposes at least once: In 1637, Indian captives who ran away were "branded on the shoulder."¹⁵⁸ Although branding seems a way to permanently mark and identify a person as criminal, literally writing reputation on the body, it is possible that the brandings were less permanent than they might

¹⁵³ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:257. For branding of burglars, see *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:48; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 6:253–54; *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, Volume 9, Sept. 25, 1683 to April 20, 1686*, vol. 9 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1975), 271; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:87–88, 235, 548–49, 556–57. The B for blasphemy seems to have been in use in old England at the time, since that was the letter set on the forehead of notorious Quaker James Naylor.

¹⁵⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:163. On the ways these punishments marked deviance, see Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 197–98.

¹⁵⁵ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:99–101.

¹⁵⁶ In England, branding on the hand was used to ensure that the "benefit of clergy" was not claimed more than once. Ingram, "Shame and Pain," 46.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:69.

¹⁵⁸ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 225.

seem. In England it was sometimes the case that constables “use[d] a light touch or an iron not heated sufficiently to destroy the tissue,” which would have allowed the mark to heal with less scarring and thus allowing the criminal to escape permanent reputation advertised on his face or hand.¹⁵⁹ The branded letters were also probably quite small, even in the case of a notorious and dangerous criminal like James Naylor, the English Quaker who was subjected to branding in London after conviction for blasphemy.

While it is possible that branding marks could have been hidden or could have faded over time, punishment for extreme crimes could mark the body in ways that could not be concealed. Ear cropping was a mark that would have been unmistakable to those encountering the criminal in the future. This was yet another punishment imported from England, where serious offenders were punished by having their ears nailed to the pillory and then having to cut themselves free.¹⁶⁰ In New England the sentence of ear cropping was not often used except for burglars and Quakers, two groups who might slip into a community unnoticed and cause danger and disorder. Other sentences of ear cutting were handed down for “uttering malicious and scandalous speeches against the government and the church” and “forgery, lying, and other foul offences.”¹⁶¹ The loss of an ear would have made a criminal past unmistakable to any who encountered them. Desire to escape this permanent reputation may have been the impetus for

¹⁵⁹ Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts*, 181. In Plymouth only men were branded, and this seems to have been true in Massachusetts Bay as well, though at least one woman was branded in Maine. See Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 127; Frederick Newberry, “A Red-Hot A and a Lusting Divine: Sources for The Scarlet Letter,” *New England Quarterly* 60 (1987): 257–58.

¹⁶⁰ Ingram, “Shame and Pain,” 46–47.

¹⁶¹ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:88, 295; 4, part 1:308–9; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1673–1692*, 1:283–84; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1630–1644*, 2:16. In addition to marking the body of a criminal in ways that could not be disguised, cutting off ears was also calls to mind that livestock were identified by marks on their ears, and livestock thieves were often accused of cutting off ears to hide owner’s marks. See *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:480.

Hannah Ballantine's successful petition in 1661 to have the General Court remit the part of her husband's sentence "respecting the cutting off of her husband's ear."¹⁶²

Ignominy marked on the body could continue after death, as when Plymouth placed Wituwamat's head on a pike outside their fort, or when Metacom's (Philip's) head was placed on a spike outside Plymouth at the end of King Philip's War.¹⁶³ The General Court also forbade those who died by suicide from being buried in the usual burying grounds; instead they were to be "buried in some common highway...and a cart load of stones laid upon the grave, as a brand of infamy, and as a warning to others to beware of the like damnable practices."¹⁶⁴ The bodies of two black slaves were defiled by burning after their executions for arson.¹⁶⁵ The Quakers executed in 1685 were buried in an unmarked grave "in under or near the gallows," and the governor and council repeatedly resisted efforts by others to "enclose the ground...with pales" to mark their resting place.¹⁶⁶ These instances of either erasure or display of corpses was symbolic, allowing the community to discourage disorderly or dangerous activities.

Displaying the bodies of criminals and drawing public attention to their crimes was a way of reinforcing the puritan emphasis on communal responsibility for each other's behavior. The use of papers provided public refutation of slanderous words or blasphemous actions, while the

¹⁶² Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 2:11.

¹⁶³ Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 57; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1998), chapter 7.

¹⁶⁴ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part 1:432.

¹⁶⁵ Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1673–1692*, 1:198–99. There is some controversy over whether the slave woman, Maria, was burned to death or burned after death. See John Noble, *The Case of Maria in the Court of Assistants in 1681* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson & Son, 1902); Warren, *New England Bound*, 199–206; Robert C. Twombly and Robert H. Moore, "Black Puritan: The Negro in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 24 (1967): 234–35; James Russell Trumbull, *History of Northampton Massachusetts from Its Settlement in 1654*, vol. 1 (Northampton, MA: Gazette Printing, 1898), 376–77. One rarely cited contemporary source recorded that she was indeed burned alive. Peter Thacher Diary Typescript, typescript P-186, Vol. 1, p. 232, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:67.

use of symbols like nooses or special clothing marked a criminal and their actions as especially dangerous and distressing. The uses of bodily marking that puritans brought with them from England helped train eyes on criminals, sometimes long after their conviction, and encouraged a kind of ritualized watchfulness that trained inhabitants to also see and identify criminality in their everyday lives.

* * *

Nan Goodman has described shaming punishments as a form of social exclusion, but the marginalization was temporary.¹⁶⁷ Still, being whipped or confined in the stocks identified the offender before the community as a person worthy of shame. The criminal's reputation, if not their body, was marred by the event in ways that were likely not easily forgotten and this stain was probably intended to discourage recidivism. However, the puritan belief in redemption could mitigate whatever reputational effects the punishments might have had for those who demonstrated that their behavior was reformed or that the transgression was a temporary failure. Some were later entrusted in political or civil offices such as, ironically, constable or tithingman.¹⁶⁸ Reputation was not immutable and gossip's transient nature could cement a reputation but could also be ephemeral when a person demonstrated remorse or exhibited behavior that showed reformation. Those who already had a "common fame" or whose repeated punishment created notoriety, however, may have been denied opportunities for employment or marriage, relocated and tried to start anew, or suffered under lingering suspicion that made them more likely to be accused of crimes or face stiffer penalties in the future. As the century progressed and Boston's increasing population allowed for greater anonymity, shaming

¹⁶⁷ Goodman, *Banished*, 4–6.

¹⁶⁸ Faber, "Puritan Criminals," 136–38, 142.

punishments may have lost some of their power, but the town remained much smaller than metropolitan areas in Europe and anyone who remained long was likely to have required a good reputation free from the memory of punishment to maintain their living.¹⁶⁹ Disrepute and disgrace had real force in a face-to-face society, and particularly so in a culture that believed in a social covenant.

When holy watching failed, constables, bellmen, and tithingmen kept eyes on the street and on their neighborhoods and rooted out disorder. Notably, these official watchers were all men.¹⁷⁰ Those most poised to observe wayward behavior in their neighborhoods were not appointed as constables, watchmen, or tithingmen, and those whose misconduct was most likely to be seen as dangerous, deviant, or threatening were not included in the ranks of official watchers. Their talk was incentivized with monetary rewards, but those most likely to be privy to information about offenders or to have observed unlawful behavior were excluded from the civil structure of watching except as informers. This allowed neighborhood women and servants to choose when or if to report what they had observed. Despite efforts to institute a net of watchers who would prevent misbehavior, it was often the unofficial watchers whose gossip regulated social norms. When their watching resulted in criminal convictions, punishments further encouraged the use of talk and gossip to reiterate the boundaries of good behavior and keep order in the city on a hill.

When gossip was translated into informing, it could lead to convictions that resulted in corporal punishment, and those punishments could also serve as advertisements of the criminal's

¹⁶⁹ Hirsch, "From Pillory to Penitentiary: The Rise of Criminal Incarceration in Early Massachusetts," 1232–35.

¹⁷⁰ Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change, 1630–1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 83.

misdeeds, spreading the gossip still further into the community—by design. Punishments were inflicted in public places frequented by the largest crowds, and the bodies of criminals were marked in either temporary or permanent ways that used bodily display and debasement to create or reinforce a reputation for criminality and sinful behavior. While these punishments could create “common fame,” informing those who did not know the criminal of their wayward behavior, they were just as likely to cement reputations already formed in the minds of those who had previously encountered these people in their daily lives. Some punishments, particularly branding or ear cropping, could prevent the perpetrator from being trusted in a new community if they tried to flee from the reputation they had garnered. The religious imperative to watchfulness dovetailed with public safety concerns to extend surveillance beyond the godly to include times, places, and people who might otherwise have fallen outside the watchfulness regime. Public punishment trained the eyes of Boston’s inhabitants, disciplining their gaze while also encouraging it.

In both the church and law enforcement, men were authorized to define orderly speech and morality and to make rules about its surveillance. They were the authorities to whom disorder was reported. This meant that women were subject to behavioral prescriptions and possible penalties that they had no formal role in defining. In practice, however, their mobility and access to particular spaces meant that women had a huge role to play in watching for delinquent or dangerous behavior. The regulations that governed law enforcement and punishment can leave an impression that only men were visible and active in the town’s public spaces, but in reality women were also always present and their eyes and ears were usually open. It was in this environment of prescriptive watchfulness, in which church and civil authority

relied on community surveillance while also providing guidelines to discipline it, that women oversaw the actions of their neighbors.

CHAPTER THREE

Prying Eyes and Ears: Neighborhood Gossip and Family Disorder

Informal moral regulation of individual behavior was an integral element of puritan watchfulness and was more effective for many transgressions than the formal apparatus of constables and watchmen. Wayward community members were approached privately long before incidents came to official attention, and authorities could close their ears when they wanted to avoid becoming involved in a dispute. Neighborhood talk, however, could enforce morality and norms, and the danger of becoming the subject of talk was a real threat.¹ Neighbors provided the most important check on family disorder, particularly in communities where “neighbor” denoted not merely proximity but also ideals of economic, social, and spiritual cooperation. Being a good neighbor was an important aspect of early modern English society, particularly for women, who were expected to cultivate a social and economic network, offer charity to the less fortunate, and borrow or lend supplies and equipment for domestic chores. Some have argued that puritanism’s attack on traditional rituals caused a decline in the values of neighborliness in favor of increased individualism but seventeenth-century New England

¹ Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 5–11; Elaine Forman Crane, *Witches, Wife Beaters, and Whores: Common Law and Common Folk in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 85; Elizabeth Pleck, “Criminal Approaches to Family Violence, 1640–1980,” *Crime and Justice* 11 (1989): 22; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 27; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, chap. 3; Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, chap. 3; Flaherty, “Law and the Enforcement of Morals in Early America,” 245; Laura Gowing, “‘The Freedom of the Streets’: Women and Social Space, 1560–1640,” in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 133–34. When Anne Eaton was brought to court in New Haven, minister John Davenport claimed to have no knowledge of it even though he lived next door and testimony showed that extensive rumors were swirling about all through his neighborhood. See Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 167.

continued to rely on communal values for economic security and for moral policing. While official watchers appointed by the government were all men, women in particular were agents of informal policing in the neighborhood and household. Women's work patterns and access to household spaces allowed them to gather and share information. Contrary to popular impressions that women's lives were spatially constrained, their movement through and around the neighborhood in the course of their work and socializing gave them access to information about the inner workings of other households and families. They not only watched but also shared information, sometimes with other neighbors as gossip and sometimes transforming it from gossip to news when they testified in court.

The family was a particular target of watchfulness because the well-being of the community rested on well-ordered families. In cases of divorce, cruelty, and sexual transgressions, women's words were often the only corroborating information available because their positions as neighbors or servants admitted them to intimate parts of households and made them privy to otherwise secret information. Both husbands and wives could be subject to violence by their spouses, but investigating the ways neighbors, households, and kin responded to family violence committed by household governors illuminates the ways that gossip helped police those in authority. In these cases, women's words bolstered the claims of wives who may not have been believed without corroboration. Women who were victims of violence in their households often intentionally enlisted the help of their neighbors, not only for immediate safety but also to document their complaints in memories that could be recalled if they were forced to seek official remedy. For as much as there might have been shame in letting others know about the inner workings of an abusive household and danger that a woman could be blamed her husband's behavior, there was also protection in allowing others to see into the household and

create public knowledge about it. Women's gossip could enforce household order both by supporting patriarchal ideals and by taking the place of a man's household governance when he did not adequately order his family or when he was himself the source of disorder. Historians have disagreed about the relative importance of family and community in policing behavior, but this chapter shows that responses to family misgovernment were variable.² Neighbors sometimes went to law and sometimes attempted informal mediation, and aggrieved wives themselves took different paths to relief. What was constant was the attention that community and family members paid to the workings of households and their efforts to observe and remember disorder they saw or heard about. Their responses were different depending on the kind of disorder found in a household—drunkenness and fornication were fodder for rampant gossip, while discussions of family violence were more circumspect. Watchfulness and gossip shaped family relationships, but always in the context of social mores about what was an appropriate subject for gossip and what was not, and always in tension with patriarchal understandings of male authority in the household.

Marital discord was unlikely to be kept secret from the prying eyes and ears of servants and near neighbors. Incidents took place in public view and stories were told openly. Even when those outside the household were not present—as they often were—interiors would have been visible through open doors and unglazed windows, and sound would have carried through walls, gardens, and streets. Dense settlement patterns in towns and building materials with many cracks and holes meant that what happened inside the household was easily known to the near

² Helena Wall argued that the family was subordinated to the needs of the community and the neighborhood used gossip and watchfulness to enforce standards of harmony and stability on unruly families, while M. Michelle Jarrett Morris found that community needs were subordinate to family loyalties in policing sexual behavior. Wall, *Fierce Communion*; Morris, *Under Household Government*.

neighbors and family members who were in and around the house with regularity.³ The extent to which neighbors felt compelled to bring another's household affairs to public attention, at what point they felt warranted in doing so, and the amount of information about the workings of others' families to which they were privy shows that gossip was rampant and served an important function in creating, maintaining, and enforcing order. Household heads and subordinates had different ways of understanding the value of community knowledge. Gossip was harnessed in the service of official action when informal efforts failed to contain disorder and it became a threat to public safety. Neighborhood information networks, primarily maintained by women and servants, were therefore vital to the maintenance and enforcement of family order and the welfare of the covenanted community.

“always going between each other's houses”⁴
Neighborhoods and Households

Boston's English settlers used the word “neighborhood” to mean simply “vicinity,” and “near neighbors” were those who lived in adjoining lots. Communities, however, were defined more broadly to include ties of affection and common purpose that bound them to fellow church members and extended kin networks. Shared work bound them to those with whom they labored in fields or kitchens, shared experience bound women to their midwives and birth attendants, and shared living quarters and daily experience bound servants to masters and mistresses. Like the interlocking covenants that created bonds of obligation and responsibility in early New England,

³ On seventeenth-century house architecture, see James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 130–46; James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), chapter 5; Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, chapter 2; Thomas Franklin Waters, “The Early Homes of the Puritans,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 33 (1898): 45–79. See also Gowing, “Freedom of the Streets,” 136–37; Janay Nugent, ““None Must Meddle Betueene Man and Wife”: Assessing Family and the Fluidity of Public and Private in Early Modern Scotland,” *Journal of Family History* 35 (2010): 221–23.

⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 3:209.

overlapping bonds of community created both tension and stability. Not all those in the same neighborhood were allies or friends, and not all of one's allies lived nearby.⁵ Nevertheless, it was those who lived nearest who were best able to observe, and sometimes intervene, in households and families in their neighborhoods. One deponent told the Essex County court that if his neighbor had been breaking the law "he would have heard of it, because they were neighbors, always going between each other's houses."⁶ When cases came to court, it was often neighbors and servants rather than family members who offered testimony about a disorderly household.⁷

By design, homes were set close together in towns on relatively small lots, big enough for a kitchen garden and small animals but separate from planting and grazing land. Centrally located residential areas provided increased security from enemies without and allowed increased surveillance to protect against enemies within. In smaller towns houses were set near the meetinghouse, but on Boston's peninsula the most densely settled areas stretched in a strip from near the wharves in the north end to the areas surrounding the town dock and the town house, and then reaching down the road that led to the Boston neck.⁸ These neighborhoods were

⁵ König, *Law and Society*, 85; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 180; Bender, *Community and Social Change*; Daniel C. Beaver, *Parish Communities and Religious Conflict in the Vale of Gloucester, 1590–1690* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 56–59. There is an extensive historiographic debate about the "decline of neighborliness" in early modern England. An overview can be found in Keith Wrightson, "The 'Decline of Neighbourliness' Revisited," in *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Norman L. Jones and Daniel Woolf (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19–49.

⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 3:209.

⁷ Morris argued that family and extended kin were more important than neighbors in policing sexual transgressions and that those who fell outside family loyalty were often most at risk of prosecution and conviction. This study does not dispute her findings but suggests that she may have underplayed the importance of neighborly relationships in urban areas. Morris, *Under Household Government*.

⁸ Samuel C. Clough, Map of the Town of Boston 1676 (c1920), Samuel Chester Clough research materials toward a topographical history of Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*; John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 147–78; John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), chap. 5, esp. 140–46.

not socially or economically homogenous. During the seventeenth century, people of various income levels and occupations lived in proximity to one another, especially near the harbor, where necessity meant that wealthy merchants' homes and warehouses were in shouting distance of bawdy houses and disreputable taverns.⁹ Whether working or at leisure, Bostonians did not keep to their own homes and the streets would have been busy. Throughout the day, men and women were in the streets coming and going from work, fields, markets, shops, and the homes of friends and neighbors. They were socializing and conducting business; buying herbs, produce, and medicine; or sharing the load of labor-intensive work such as laundry or cloth production.¹⁰ Men and women socialized in others' homes; in ordinaries, inns, and cookhouses; and in the streets, fields, or commons. Children roamed the streets when not in school or at work in the house or fields, which put them in danger from unattended carts, livestock, loose dogs, and horses.¹¹ Strangers were prevalent in public spaces as well. In port towns like Boston and Salem, streets and wharves would have been full of sailors when ships were docked or when

⁹ Joseph F. Balicki, "Wharves, Privies, and the Pewterer: Two Colonial Period Sites on the Shawmut Peninsula, Boston," *Historical Archaeology* 32 (1998): 100; Lauren J. Cook and Joseph Balicki, "The Paddy's Alley and Cross Street Back Lot Sites, Boston, Massachusetts, Volume 1," Technical Report, Archaeological Data Recovery (Boston, MA: Central Artery/Tunnel Project, August 1996), 12, 203.

¹⁰ Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 28–29, 94; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 31; Ulrich, "A Friendly Neighbor," 395.

¹¹ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 65, 129, 141, 147, 158; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 227; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, chapters 1 and 3; Ulrich, "A Friendly Neighbor"; Ulrich, "Winthrop's City of Women," 31–35; Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England*, chapter 3; Daniel Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 133–35; Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2007), chapter 3; James E. McWilliams, "'To Forward Well-Flavored Productions': The Kitchen Garden in Early New England," *New England Quarterly* 77 (2004): 25–50; James E. McWilliams, "Butter, Milk, and a 'Spare Ribb': Women's Work and the Transatlantic Economic Transition in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 82 (2009): 5–24.

weather prevented them departing. Boston attracted crowds from the surrounding area on market days, court days, elections, and during militia trainings.¹²

On a typical day, many men may have been away from the main areas of town for all of the day, leaving many women, children, and servants in possession of both homes and public areas during daylight hours. Craftsmen often worked in their homes or nearby shops, and wives often assisted with small manufactures, but some work sites were located in the Town House or in warehouses along the waterfront, separating men from the work of the household for significant hours. Planting and pasture lands were set outside the town center, usually in long strips that meant those engaged in agricultural labor worked in close proximity to each other but away from residential areas. Some pasture or planting ground was assigned as far away as the Muddy River (present-day Brookline), Rumney Marsh (Revere), and Pullen Point (Winthrop), but even those with nearer fields would have been away from their homes and neighborhoods in parts of the peninsula that were reserved for those purposes, and market days would have regularly taken them to nearby towns. Women whose husbands were sailors or merchants were often left alone with their children and servants for the better part of a year. While men pursued their callings, women were not confined indoors. Their work extended in and around the neighborhood and combined socializing with domestic chores. During daylight hours women worked in their kitchen gardens and tended small animals on their house lots, and in decent weather they may have worked on textiles on the porch to take advantage of the light as well as

¹² Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England*, 80–82; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 27–28; Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston*, 167–71, 176, 215–16; Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 97–100.

the opportunity to chat with neighbors. Women also went to their near neighbors to borrow implements or to obtain firebrands, or met while visiting the bakehouse or doing laundry.¹³

Early Boston was also much noisier than one might expect. Sound would have carried far in the absence of mechanical sounds and tall buildings. The beginning and end of the day were marked by the beating of a drum or the sounding of a conch shell, and starting in the 1640s by bells, which were also used to summon inhabitants to the meetinghouse for services and lectures. As the colony of Massachusetts Bay and the town of Boston became more established and prosperous, bells would have been heard ringing from the meetinghouses or Town House to mark the beginning and end of the day and to announce the market opening, and additional bells may have been rung for alarms, lectures, elections, and militia exercises. These bells helped define the boundaries of the community; limiting construction of new houses more than one-half mile from the meetinghouse also ideally meant that all inhabitants would have lived within earshot of the bells or drum. Human voices, too, filled the soundscape. Men and women stopped to chat over fences or in the lanes or called to each other from one threshold to another and these conversations could have been easily overheard by passersby or near neighbors. The day would also have been punctuated by the calling of the town crier proclaiming lost goods, chimney sweeps advertising their services, or the constable pursuing a criminal with a “hue and cry.” The sounds of horses and carts, manufacture, and construction filled the air. At night,

¹³ Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149–63; Ulrich, “A Friendly Neighbor”; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 27; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 53; Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England*, chaps. 3–4; Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England*, 4–12; Gowing, “Freedom of the Streets”; Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen*, 41–52; *Boston Town Records, 1634-1660*, passim; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, passim. See also Barbara A. Hanawalt, “Of Good and Ill Repute”: *Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 5.

however, the town would have been dark and quiet and any wayward noises coming from homes or voices in the street would have drawn attention.¹⁴

Despite magistrates' efforts to keep houses from encroaching on public roadways, houses were built very close to the street, which made views into porches and through windows visible to passersby. Porches projected from the front of the house and were enclosed rather than open to the air but front doors were often left open in agreeable weather to let in light and to signal that neighbors could enter. Windows were often unglazed and would have offered views into the interior when shutters were open. Rooms inside served many functions, often simultaneously, and the most visible ground floor spaces in particular were used for work, socializing, and sleeping. Those houses with dedicated sleeping chambers would not have offered privacy either, since bedchambers and even beds were usually shared and only in the most affluent households would servants have slept separate from their masters or mistresses. Sounds would have carried and secrecy would have been nearly impossible in houses with multifunction rooms and poorly sealed walls, floors, and roofs. Certainly, these porous structures created ample opportunity for watchfulness among those who wanted to scrutinize the actions and conversations of other household members.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 97, 108, 127, 154, 200–201; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 61–68, 175; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 92–93; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 81; David D. Hall, “The Mental World of Samuel Sewall,” in *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, ed. David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 76–77.

¹⁵ *Boston Town Records, 1634–1660*, 12; Fiske Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1922), 16–18; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 93; Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England*, 52–53; Cott, “Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records,” 22–23. Robert Blair St. George discussed the implications for privacy in eighteenth-century changes in architecture that hid the functions of rooms from street view. Robert Blair St. George, *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 271.

Boston households usually consisted of a husband, wife, and children, and moderately prosperous families typically had at least one household servant who lived in. Remarriage and what we would now call “blended families” were common at a time when accidents, illness, or childbirth could prevent one or both parents from living to old age, which made relationships among household members less than straightforward. The household was hierarchical and patriarchal. Mothers and fathers were both responsible for the economic, moral, and spiritual well-being of subordinate servants and children but fathers had a special responsibility for overseeing his family’s religious instruction and keeping watch to ensure they did not stray.¹⁶

Nearly all aspects of the household had the potential to be deemed of public concern because the family was the cornerstone of social order. If information entering the official record demarcated gossip from news, the shift seems to have been determined by the extent to which the information affected public safety and public order. Particular subjects of gossip came to public attention when society’s moral boundaries had been violated but informal policing attempted to maintain those boundaries long before magistrates became involved. The line was particularly blurry at the level of the neighborhood and household. New England puritans, like their English counterparts, conceptualized the family as a “little commonwealth,” both a reflection of and a foundation for societal order. Prescriptive literature that circulated on both

¹⁶ Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 97–106, 137–48; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), chap. 4; Lisa Wilson, *A History of Stepfamilies in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 2–3; Cotton Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered. Or An Essay to Render Parents and Children Happy in One Another*. (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, for Michael Perry and Benjamin Eliot, 1699), 35–36; Deodat Lawson, *The Duty and Property of a Religious Householder* (Boston: Bartholomew Green for Samuel Phillips, 1693), 22–33; Benjamin Wadsworth, *The Well-Ordered Family: Or, Relative Duties. Being the Substance of Several Sermons, About Family Prayer. Duties of Husbands & Wives. Duties of Parents & Children. Duties of Masters & Servants*. (Boston: B. Green, for Nicholas Battolph, 1712), 17–22, 53–55, 59–68.

sides of the Atlantic reinforced and encouraged this understanding of families.¹⁷ The family was where subordinates learned how to live well and men learned how to exercise authority. The stakes of maintaining good household order, and helping neighbors to do so, were high. Any disorder could undermine and jeopardize the entire community, which meant that fathers and husbands could not be allowed to rule their households with impunity but instead must be observed and, if need be, corrected. Although these ideas were common throughout the English world during the early modern period, the puritans of Massachusetts Bay took special interest in the good ordering of the family and encouraged stricter surveillance of family affairs than old England.¹⁸

“how shall I endure it all my life”¹⁹
The Naylor Divorce

Certain forms of misconduct garnered particular attention from neighbors and were brought to public attention more frequently. Drunkenness, poverty, and sexual transgressions such as adultery or fornication caused neighborhood disruption and threatened to make families

¹⁷ Robert Cleaver and John Dod, *A Godly Forme of Houshold Gouernment for the Ordering of Priuate Families* (London: [Eliot’s Court Press for] the assignes of Thomas Man, 1630), 13; William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London: Iohn Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), 18.

¹⁸ Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 162–64; Ann M. Little, “Men on Top? The Farmer, the Minister, and Marriage in Early New England,” *Pennsylvania History* 64 (1997): 124–26; K. Kelly Weisberg, “‘Under Greet Temptations Heer’: Women and Divorce in Puritan Massachusetts,” *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): 186; Susan Dwyer Amussen, “‘Being Stirred to Much Unquietness’: Violence and Domestic Violence in Early Modern England,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6 (1994): 73; Carole Shammas, “Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (1995): 117; Abby Chandler, “At the Magistrate’s Discretion: Sexual Crime and New England Law, 1636–1718” (PhD diss., University of Maine, 2008), 8–9; Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*, 85–89; Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674–1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 86–88; Richard J. Ross, “Puritan Godly Discipline in Comparative Perspective: Legal Pluralism and the Sources of ‘Intensity,’” *American Historical Review* 113 (October 1, 2008): 989–90; Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 53–61.

¹⁹ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

dependent on poor relief. Marital disharmony, such as domestic violence, also attracted attention from neighbors but was usually addressed by the courts only in extreme cases or as a corollary to other kinds of crime, probably because informal methods of intervention were used in less severe cases. Cases that did reach the courts confirmed puritans' belief that a disordered family rarely manifested only one kind of trouble. Since fathers had a particular duty to manage their household well, to watch over their subordinates, and to provide religious instruction, an unruly father was a particular threat to public order. Lack of restraint or proper management multiplied sin so a household whose head was guilty of drunkenness, for instance, was also likely to be the site of violence or sexual impropriety. While today we might attribute this to the way alcohol lowers inhibitions, in the seventeenth century it was interpreted as the contagion of sin.²⁰ This amplified the need to keep a watchful eye on neighbors to discover even minor offenses. Civil enforcement officials such as constables, night watchmen, and tithingmen were responsible for preventing poorly governed families and individuals from creating more widespread disorder, but usually only when informal sanction among godly families failed would they end up before the magistrates.²¹ These themes emerge clearly in the records of one particularly well-documented divorce case from late-seventeenth-century Boston, that of Katherine Nanny Naylor and her husband Edward.

The Nanny-Naylor divorce shows how multiple household disorders were linked to the husband's failure to act as a responsible steward of family order and how knowledge of them spread throughout the neighborhood. Depositions in the case reveal the spaces where women

²⁰ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 88–89.

²¹ Weisberg, ““Under Greet Temptations Heer”: Women and Divorce in Puritan Massachusetts,” 186; Cott, “Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records,” 22–25; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 142–52.

talked, how servants spread information, the interactions of household and neighborhood, the community's investment in family order, and the power of women's words in maintaining or subverting order and hierarchies and in perpetuating the puritan imperative of watchfulness. Divorce was easier to obtain in New England than in old England because puritans viewed marriage not as a sacrament but as a civil contract that could be dissolved. Divorces were granted when a spouse failed to live up to their marital duties, whether in the marriage bed or in the purse; for abandonment and infidelity, including bigamy and adultery; and for cruelty. K. Kelly Weisberg's analysis of divorce cases in Massachusetts during the seventeenth century found that women's successful divorce petitions all proved their husbands to have "an unfit character for family government." Divorce could prevent disorder by ensuring that families were properly governed and by keeping women and children from being reliant on charity if a husband did not adequately provide for them. Allowing divorced persons to remarry also prevented the threat that they would be tempted in their single state to commit sexual transgressions.²²

Katherine Naylor's petitions for divorce in early 1671/2, first to the General Court and then to the Court of Assistants, portrayed her husband Edward as a failure as a family governor. He did not model appropriate behavior for his dependents, was cruel and violent, and disparaged his wife's domestic labor. His economic mismanagement and disinterest in religion also indicated that he was inadequate for the task of ordering his household. Katherine's petitions

²² James T. Johnson, "The Covenant Idea and the Puritan View of Marriage," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (1971): 107–18; Weisberg, "'Under Greet Temptations Heer': Women and Divorce in Puritan Massachusetts," 187–88; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 34–38; Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*, chap. 3; Nancy F. Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976): 589; Thomas A. Foster, "Deficient Husbands: Manhood, Sexual Incapacity, and Male Marital Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999): 733–38; Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 101.

asked for “relief against the cruelty and oppression and many abuses she frequently and indeed daily receives from her husband,” which left her in fear for her life. She told the court she believed he would rape or kill her if the divorce was not granted. He was not only violent but also committed “whoredoms and abuses of the marriage bed.” In addition to the suffering he inflicted, Katherine also told the court that Edward was not capable of ensuring that their two children would be “maintained and educated in the fear of God.” Finally, she sought to secure the estate her first husband, Robert Nanny, left her and their children, which was in danger of being used to satisfy Naylor’s creditors.²³

Katherine had been suffering for years in her marriage to Naylor but her decision to finally pursue a divorce may have been precipitated not only by his very public sexual affairs but also by fears that Naylor’s debts threatened her children’s inheritance. Robert Nanny left Katherine and their children a large estate when he died in 1663. The inventory made of the dwelling house alone listed goods valued in the hundreds of pounds, and the property and his warehouses were worth at least another £560.²⁴ In February 1671, at the same time the court was collecting testimonies in the divorce case, Edward was served with attachments for debts that totaled nearly £500.²⁵

²³ Katherine Naylor petition to the General Court and Katherine Naylor petition to the Court of Assistants, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148. The Naylor divorce has received a great deal of attention because Katherine Nanny Naylor’s privy at the site where she lived during and after the divorce was excavated as part of the Central Artery “Big Dig” project in Boston. See Cook and Balicki, “The Paddy’s Alley and Cross Street Back Lot Sites, Boston, Massachusetts, Volume 1”; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Big Dig, Little Dig, Hidden Worlds: Boston,” *Common-Place*, Special Issue: Early Cities of the Americas, 3, no. 4 (July 2003), <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-03/no-04/boston/>; Dana B. Heck and Joseph F. Balicki, “Katherine Naylor’s ‘House of Office’: A Seventeenth-Century Privy,” *Historical Archaeology* 32 (1998): 24–37.

²⁴ Robert Nanny Will (September 7, 1663), Probate and Family Court Department file papers, Box 3, case #348, Massachusetts, Suffolk County probate records 1636–1894. An extensive fight ensued after Katherine’s death over the dispensation of Nanny’s lands and goods. Inventories from that time show that the property in his estate, including the house and land in Boston and hundreds of acres of upland, meadow, and marsh in York county, Maine, was now worth £1700. Katherine’s will can be found in Probate Papers Case #15771, Probate Records 1648–1924 (Middlesex County, Massachusetts), Middlesex County Courthouse, Cambridge MA.

²⁵ *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:11, 97; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:747.

The Naylor family lived in the house that Nanny had left to Katherine and their children on a large lot in the narrow neck of land between the Mill Pond and Boston Harbor in the North End, near the draw bridge over Mill Creek and close to the wharves on the street that led to the Second Church meetinghouse. This was a relatively dense neighborhood and their street would have been heavily trafficked with people going to and from the wharves, town house, marketplace, and meetinghouses, in addition to the public houses that dotted the area near the waterfront.²⁶ This location in a busy, well-traveled part of Boston meant that their activities were particularly visible and also that they were in close proximity to places of disorder such as ordinaries and warehouses. The Naylor family's house was also quite large. An inventory taken of the house at the time of Robert Nanny's death describes many well-appointed rooms, including a hall, kitchen, three chambers, and two garrets. During the Naylor family's marriage the house was home to not only Edward, Katherine, and their children, but also her two surviving children with Robert Nanny and multiple servants who were able to observe the inner workings of the household.²⁷

The issues raised by Katherine's petition were supported by numerous testimonies and depositions that also detailed Edward's drunkenness and flouting of expectations of proper household government, issues which concerned the community as a whole. Depositions about Edward Naylor's misbehavior show how some of the most marginalized members of the community participated in informal moral policing and intentional information gathering in which they collaborated with neighboring householders. Family issues could remain part of a very loud "whisper network" among neighborhood men and women for years and the

²⁶ Clough, "Map of the Town of Boston 1676"; Cook and Balicki, "The Paddy's Alley and Cross Street Back Lot Sites, Boston, Massachusetts, Volume 1," 203.

²⁷ Robert Nanny Will.

information was something between secret and public. Abuse and infidelity in the Naylor household could not be hidden from servants and neighbors who carefully collected information, while constables and watchmen failed to note or at least failed to act on even Naylor's most public misbehavior such as coming home in the middle of the night, frequenting the bawdy house of Alice Thomas, arranging trysts in warehouses, and forcing his children out of doors in the snow. While the state was reluctant to intervene in all but the most acute cases of marital disharmony, neighbors' interest in family affairs meant that when Katherine sued for divorce there were ample witnesses who could testify to Edward's behavior. Women needed informed neighbors, friends, and servants to help them if the case came to court.

Testimony against Edward Naylor was taken for the divorce case in February 1671/2 and in his subsequent trial for cruelty, "uncivil carriage," and fornication in September 1672. Extant depositions and testimony from twenty-two women and eleven men provide evidence that at least sixty people were actively talking about the Naylor's marriage, with the balance heavily tipped toward women (forty women and about twenty men). The disproportionate number of women can partially be explained by the number of servants and other working women represented in the records, including five female servants who lived at various times in the Naylor household, a midwife and two birth attendants, and five other women who were servants in other households. This is in itself significant because women's work patterns and living arrangements were crucial to their ability to observe and collect evidence. Those who had intimate knowledge about the couple were women—servants, neighbors, and midwives—and the court recognized their special access to information. This number does not include unnamed observers who must have seen Naylor's misdeeds in streets, ordinaries, warehouses, and ferry launches; those who overheard arguments in his household; those who served on the jury at

Edward's trial for fornication and cruelty; and the people those people told. There were likely many more eye and ear witnesses to Naylor's misbehavior but since fees were required for depositions, Katherine Naylor would only have called those with the most direct and convincing knowledge of her suffering.²⁸ Naylor's debts also perhaps prevented him from being able to pay for depositions in his own defense; only three of Naylor's associates were mentioned in the trial and none testified. Although ages are only given for deponents, it seems that the age range of the women in the neighborhood gossip network, which ranged from eighteen to fifty-two years old, was much wider than the men who gave evidence, all of whom were over thirty and only one older than forty. This, again, is because female servants who testified were significantly younger than the neighbors and others who gave evidence. These testimonies reveal the mechanics of informal watchfulness. It is clear that word of Naylor's misbehavior had circulated for years, but some behaviors were public knowledge and some were known only in the household before the divorce petition and subsequent testimony brought this information into public record. The lack of official sanction against Edward in the years prior to Katherine's divorce petition does not mean the information had been private; neighbors and servants had collected information and saved it in their memories so that it was available when official action required evidence.²⁹ The elaborate formal apparatus of watchfulness centered on church and state was not operative in

²⁸ Abby Chandler, "'And the Author of Wickedness Surely Is Most to Be Blamed': The Declaration of Debora Proctor," *Legacy* 28 (2011): 314–17. Nancy Cott suggested that urban women were more likely to include cruelty in their divorce petitions because "perhaps urban women had higher standards for kind treatment in marriage than did rural women, or more readily took official steps to combat physical abuse." The Naylor divorce, and the fact that Katherine endured Edward's abuse for years before petitioning for divorce, indicates that the urban-rural divide might have other sources. Urban women had better access to courts, and denser neighborhoods meant larger social networks and more potential witnesses to help them prove allegations. Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women," 609.

²⁹ Cott has argued that the disproportionate presence of neighbors compared to family in divorce depositions indicates that neighbors were more important than kin in social networks, but it is also possible that social norms made family testimony less desirable. Cott, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," 25.

either the divorce or Naylor's subsequent conviction.³⁰ No watchmen were called to testify and no religious sanctions were recorded. It was the informal watchfulness of the household and neighborhood that policed family behavior. Despite not being reported to authorities prior to the divorce, Edward's behavior, and Katherine's, were closely watched.

**“Mr. Naylor's whore”³¹
Fornication, Adultery, and Bastardy**

Edward Naylor's illicit relationships with two women, Mary More and Mary Read, were prominent in Katherine's petitions and in the testimonies and depositions given in the case. Infidelity was one of the most common reasons cited in divorce petitions, presumably because it was one of the few legitimate reasons for magistrates to grant marital separation. Fornication and adultery were public concerns because they undermined the patriarchal family, tainted the community with sin, and had the potential to create a financial burden if an illegitimate pregnancy resulted. Community surveillance was indispensable to proving adultery or fornication and even if there were no witnesses to the sexual act, observations of suspicious behavior could lend credence to the naming of a bastard's father. Fornication, or sexual relations with an unmarried woman, was typically only officially exposed and prosecuted if the woman

³⁰ Many of the witnesses in the case likely had some association with one of Boston's puritan meetinghouses. At least six witnesses who testified in the cases had been baptized in Boston's First Church as infants, meaning that they were likely raised in godly households. Baptisms were recorded at the First Church for infants named William Baker, Hanna Baitman, John Howen, Israel Howen, Mary Jackson, and Jabez Salter with dates that roughly match the ages given in their testimonies. See Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*. The state of Second Church's records make it impossible to verify if any witnesses were baptized or members there. Given that Katherine was a minister's daughter, it seems fair to assume Naylor's servants would have attended church with Katherine and at least some neighbors probably also attended meetings. It is also unlikely that the daughter of a minister as prominent as John Wheelwright would have married an unchurched man and a letter Edward wrote to Katherine after the divorce demonstrated familiarity with godly language, so her husband would also have been well-versed in the importance of watchfulness and its dangers.

³¹ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

fell pregnant and gave birth to a child.³² When an unmarried woman became pregnant, or when a married woman was pregnant while her husband was away, the community used watchfulness and gossip to discover the child's paternity. In cases of single women, the paternity of bastard children was a serious concern in seventeenth-century New England, not least because failure to identify the father could leave the mother and child dependent on public assistance.³³ The only other ways to prove fornication were to observe the couple in the commission of the crime or if one of them confessed. Neighbors might observe couples wandering off together, talking in suspicious ways, or behaving more explicitly—sitting on laps, laughing together, or even the act of sex itself. Women, in particular, acted as informal enforcers of sexual morality.³⁴

Mary Read was a servant in the Naylor household when she found herself pregnant in 1668, at the same time that Katherine was pregnant with her second child by Naylor. Read gave birth in Hampton, where she had gone late in her pregnancy to stay with her sister and brother-in-law, Hannah and John Souter.³⁵ Speculation and gossip about Naylor's relationship with Mary Read and the parentage of her child were rampant. No testimony suggested that the

³² Else L. Hambleton, *Daughters of Eve: Pregnant Brides and Unwed Mothers in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xi. Passive phrases like “fell pregnant” tend to erase the man who did the impregnating or erase any agentive action on the part of the couple. Describing this as conception, however, is also problematic because it implies consent that may not have been given, and the pregnancy was not an issue from conception but rather at the point it became visible. While pregnancies may have caught these couples unawares, they did not “just happen” and were not the fault of only one party.

³³ Morris, *Under Household Government*, 16, 162–69.

³⁴ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 28–29; Morris, *Under Household Government*, 64–68; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 189; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 85–95; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 98, 102–5.

³⁵ Read’s connections to Hampton, where Katherine’s father had once preached, may have helped her get a position in the Naylor household. Joseph Dow, *History of the Town of Hampton, New Hampshire, from Its Settlement in 1638, to the Autumn of 1892* (Salem, MA: Salem Press Publishing and Printing Co., 1893), 352–56; Robert Fowler Lawrence, *The New Hampshire Churches: Comprising Histories of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in the State, with Notices of Other Denominations: Also Containing Many Interesting Incidents Connected with the First Settlement of Towns* (Claremont Manufacturing Company, 1856), 66–67. Katherine’s first husband, Robert Nanny, was also from Hampton. Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 326–27, 335.

relationship between Naylor and Read was widely known before the pregnancy—no one testified to seeing them together in compromising circumstances or to discussions about the pair prior to Read’s pregnancy—but Naylor was clearly the obvious suspect to the many who sought information about the child’s paternity. Their suspicions were confirmed when Read herself swore before the Suffolk County court during the divorce proceedings that Edward Naylor had fathered the child she bore in Hampton three years before.³⁶ Neighbors’ and family members’ attempts to confirm rumors about Read and Naylor show the limitations of surveillance even within households, where a relationship between master and servant could perhaps go unobserved or uncorrected but not unsuspected. Some who did observe the relationship may have kept quiet out of fear of retaliation or to preserve the family’s reputation, but there was enough suspicion about them that Edward was the obvious suspect when Read fell pregnant.

There is no evidence that Read confided in any peers or fellow servants, but she did seek help or advice from a neighbor’s sister. John Russell reported that Mary Read had come to his house the day before she left for Hampton and went into an inward room with his sister, Johana Howen, so that she could “speak with her in private.” Russell followed them and he saw Read crying and but he then withdrew. Russell did not linger to eavesdrop on the women’s conversation but did ask about it later and his sister did not keep their conversation private. Johana Howen told John Russell that she had “pulled away her buske [corset] and she seemed to be forward with child.”³⁷ Women paid attention to other women’s bodies and were attuned to

³⁶ Mary Read oath, 30 January 1671/2, 9 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:91–92.

³⁷ John Russell testimony, 9 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

changes that could be associated with pregnancy.³⁸ Howen also said that Read had told her Naylor was the father of her unborn child. Russell likely already suspected Naylor, since he had taken Read to Naylor's house at her request when the women emerged from their private conversation.³⁹

Russell was not the only person who thought Naylor must be the father. Dorcas Woody actively sought to confirm rumors and speculation about the paternity by questioning Read's sister and brother-in-law, Hannah and John Souter, when they came to Boston. Woody had spoken with John Souter before Read left for Hampton and Woody told him that she "heard his sister Mary was with child and suspected it was by Mr. Naylor." He thought the same and told Woody that he saw behavior between them that "was not fit except they had been husband and wife." The Souters came to Boston again after the child was born and Woody inquired again about Naylor. John told her that he had asked Mary whose child she carried but she would only say that he "might guess whose it was," and he noted that the child was "much like Mr. Naylor."⁴⁰ Hannah said that she wanted to see Katherine's daughter because "she heard it was like her sister Mary's child." Woody asked if Naylor ever came to their house looking for Mary and Souter said that he did, once becoming angry when he found she was not at home. Hannah also told Woody that Edward Naylor had told her about an argument between Mary and another of their sisters in Boston. The third sister, Sarah, had called Mary "Mr. Naylor's whore, and she said Mary was such a fool she would tell Mr. Naylor anything they said" which clearly she did

³⁸ Linda Pollock, "Childbearing and Female Bonding in Early Modern England," *Social History* 22 (1997): 300.

³⁹ John Russell testimony, 9 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴⁰ John Souter testimony, 17 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

since it was Naylor who told Souter who told Woody.⁴¹ While her family members were clearly aware of Read's indiscretions and seem to have attempted to correct her behavior, it was gossip, hearsay, and assumptions rather than their direct testimony that made it into the court records.

Mary Read's family, particularly the Souters, had incentive to get Naylor to admit paternity or to make the court declare him the father so that Mary and the child did not become a financial burden to them. They had no reason to protect his reputation or to keep secrets for either of them. Many witnesses testified that Naylor had taken financial responsibility for Read, perhaps in response to Hampton's attempt to warn her back to Boston before the child was born.⁴² Johana Howen told her brother John Russell that Mary said "she should not want for her master Naylor would supply her."⁴³ Dorcas Woody said that Mary Read lived with her for a time and stayed out late several nights and had told Woody that she "would not live as a servant...nor take any wages for she could maintain herself well enough without," implying that Naylor would supply her.⁴⁴ Read showed less confidence talking to Israel and Anne Howen, telling them that she feared going to prison if Naylor did not provide her maintenance. Edward did pay for Read's lodging with John and Johana Howen before she went to Hampton and for her travel to Hampton. John and Johana Howen, and John's brother Israel and his wife Anne, all testified that John Howen was compensated with enough "sad color serge" to make a suit and a

⁴¹ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴² "Proprietors' Records of Town of Hampton NH, Volume 1," Hampton Historical Society, Hampton NH.

⁴³ John Russell testimony, 9 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴⁴ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

woman's waistcoat.⁴⁵ Dorcas Woody reported that Mary Read had also asked her sister to ask Naylor for a piece of flannel with which to make a coat, and he sent the fabric to them by Goodman Crisp.⁴⁶ Dorcas later saw Mary in Boston wearing petticoats of the same material.⁴⁷ Naylor also provided for Read in Hampton. John Souter asked Naylor for compensation for the time Mary Read lived at his house and James and Thomas Philbrick testified that they carried "two packs of goods" from Boston to Hampton in 1668 at Naylor's request. One went to John Stunyer and the other to John Souter. John Stunyer had told Thomas Philbrick that he would pay Mary Read's fine on Naylor's behalf.⁴⁸ Naylor paying for Read's lodging, travel, and fines before and during her lying in was a tacit admission of his guilt.

Read had initially refused to name the child's father, but Naylor seems to have been the prime suspect in the minds of the Howens, the Souters, John Russell, and Dorcas Woody, and several had directly confronted her about it. Those rumors were confirmed by the women who attended the child's birth in Hampton. The midwife Mary Wall and birth attendants Sarah Hobes and Mary Marston testified that they had interrogated Read about the child's father while she was in labor. By the later seventeenth century, naming the father during birth pains was understood to be incontrovertible proof of paternity and midwives were expected to interrogate unmarried laboring women.⁴⁹ Identifying the father of a bastard child was crucial not only for

⁴⁵ John and Johana Howen testimony, 9 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, and Israel and Anne Howen testimony, 9 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴⁶ Goodman Crisp may have been Richard Crispe, who was married to Katherine's youngest sister Sarah.

⁴⁷ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴⁸ James Philbrick testimony, 17 February 1671/2; Thomas Philbrick testimony, 17 February 1671/2; and John Souter testimony, 17 February 1671/2; all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 22–24; Ellen Fitzpatrick, "Childbirth and an Unwed Mother in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Signs* 8 (1983): 744–49; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 4, part

ferreting out sexual impropriety but also for allowing towns to avoid the costs of relief for unmarried mothers and their unsupported children. Read relented to the women's insistence but secured a promise from them that they would keep the information "private" unless they were forced by authority to reveal it.⁵⁰ Read likely knew that revealing her child's paternity would jeopardize any agreement she had made with Naylor for financial support.

Edward's relationship with Mary Read apparently remained secret, if not unsuspected, until her pregnancy provided proof of their liaisons. Two other servants also testified that they had rejected his attempts on their chastity, lending credibility to the charge that he had an affair with a servant in the household even in the absence of eyewitnesses to their intimate activities. But if Edward Naylor's relationship with Mary Read shows the boundaries of secrecy in late-seventeenth-century Boston, his liaisons with Mary More were conducted with a total disregard for concealment. Despite the pervasive culture of watchfulness it was possible to find places and times to pursue carnal activities in secret, so carrying on in neighborhood shops and warehouses or in the daylight was particularly brazen.⁵¹ Neighbors suspected that Edward was engaged in illicit activities with Mary More and consulted with each other and sought out information to confirm their suspicions—information that was readily available because Naylor and More were seen together in their own neighborhood.⁵² More did not become pregnant by Naylor but their

2:393; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 149–50; Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*, 225.

⁵⁰ Mary Wall, Sarah Hobes, and Mary Marston testimony, 17 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁵¹ Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 19–21.

⁵² D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 21–22. Only vague biographical details about Mary More are available in the extant records. She had a father in Boston and a grandmother in Charlestown, and she had spent some time in Nevis. Two deponents suggest she may have been married at the time of her affair with Naylor. Mary Jackson referred to Mary More as "Mary Kemball" (which could have been a secretarial error) and "Mrs. More" in her testimony, and Elizabeth Shute noted that the incidents she recalled took place "when Mary More was married." Shute also said that it was "about a month or five weeks after her husband went to Nevis," but it is unclear if she meant her own husband or More's. I have been unable to confirm a marriage but suspect she was married, went to

relationship was easily observed by neighbors, servants, and those who operated or frequented licensed and unlicensed houses of entertainment. The pair traveled together, tried to pass as a married couple, and met for liaisons in shops, ordinaries, and houses where others could spy on them through windows and around doorposts. The lies More told were easily uncovered when neighbors consulted each other and shared information. Thirteen people gave testimony about Naylor and More—five men and eight women—and they indicated that the relationship was known to at least fourteen more people, eight men and six women, in addition to the “divers others” who went unnamed. The men who testified were neighbors and householders, and one sailor. The women who testified were almost all servants to Naylor’s neighbors and to ordinary keepers. Only two of the women were not in positions of service. Those who were mentioned in these depositions were more diverse. The men were boatswains, servants, and neighbors, while the women who reportedly were talking about the relationship were equal numbers servants and neighbors. At least two of the witnesses were African servants or slaves who were clearly part of the information network of the neighborhood.

Mary More lodged with John and Elizabeth Brooking when she told them that she needed to visit her grandmother in Charlestown to tell her about being beaten by her father. She asked to borrow Elizabeth’s pattens (wooden overshoes) to get the boat for the journey and said she would leave them at the ferry house when she left. The next day, however, Goodman William’s boy came to the Brookings to ask about the pattens. Brookings had said that he would retrieve the pattens from the boathouse so it is at least possible that the boy wanted to share information

Nevis with her husband, and was then trying to get back to New England after he left, possibly on a sea voyage. If he was a mariner that would explain why she was living as a lodger but not a servant. However, she was convicted in 1672 of fornication rather than adultery. John Hull, “Memoir and Diaries of John Hull, Mint-Master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay,” in *Puritan Personal Writings: Diaries*, vol. 7, A Library of American Puritan Writings: The Seventeenth Century (New York: AMS Press, 1982), 232; Mary Jackson testimony and Elizabeth Shute testimony, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

and he told them that More had taken the ferry to Winnesemet (Chelsea), not Charlestown, and was accompanied by Edward Naylor and another man.⁵³ The pattens were also noticed by William Baker, who remembered that she had left the overshoes at his house before she “went over the ferry with Mr. Naylor to Winnesemet.”⁵⁴ When More returned about ten days later, she told the Brookings that she had been to Salem, Bass River, and Mystic with “a friend” and that when she traveled through Charlestown she “pulled her head down so that she was not known.”⁵⁵ She may have been bold about her activities with friends and neighbors but she seemed anxious that her family not find out. Mary may have tried to conceal their activities by hiding her face in Charlestown, but her lies were easily exposed when neighbors shared information with each other that revealed significant differences between her words and her actions. The boatman sharing information with the family where Mary was lodging may also have been a way of reinforcing family government and patriarchal control, perhaps expecting that John and Elizabeth Brooking would exercise their authority to correct her behavior.

Other witnesses reported that Mary More and Edward Naylor had pretended to be a married couple. Susanna Cross said that Mary More had come to her house with a man in June 1670 and sat in his lap and “they soon carried it that I took them for man and wife.” After they left Susanna began to suspect they were not married because they had been at Goody Snow’s “and she thought we would do together upon the hop bag.”⁵⁶ A black slave identified in the records only as “Mary the neger” had been at the Cross house at the same time and confirmed

⁵³ John and Elizabeth Brookings testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 5 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁵⁴ William Baker testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁵⁵ John and Elizabeth Brookings testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 5 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁵⁶ Susanna Cross testimony, 5 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.”

“they owned themselves man and wife.” Mary said that she knew Mary More and “asked how her father and mother did” and then “Mary More said she knew not her father and mother but she replied she did and then the same Mary More hung down her head.”⁵⁷ This slave woman who knew More’s family may have mentioned this as a way of obliquely signaling that word of her presence there with Naylor would not be kept secret from her family. Just as she had hidden her face in the town where her grandmother lived, More seemed worried about her parents finding out what was widely known and unhidden in her Boston neighborhood.

When suspicious activity drew attention, people tried to find out the truth and were not averse to intentional spying. When Naylor came into the house where Mary More lived late at night and went up the stairs to her chamber, a man who lived there encouraged a fellow lodger or servant, Alice Carpenter, to follow him up with a candle. She saw Naylor knock on More’s chamber door and enter after Mary answered wearing only her bedclothes. Alice was determined to find out what was going on behind the closed door and when she looked “around betwixt the door and the post” she saw Naylor “slip down his britches and go to bed.”⁵⁸ It was not only women who peeked in at suspicious behavior. John Anibal and Jabez Salter wondered who they heard talking and laughing in Widow Thomas’s shop, and Salter suggested they investigate. Anibal “thought it best to keep to my work,” but William Godfrey agreed, so they fetched a candle and “he and the neger woman went and looked in and see who it was.” Anibal’s refusal to spy into the shop did not mean he was not curious: when Salter came back, Anibal guessed that it was Edward Naylor and Mary More and Salter confirmed it. Anibal’s guess was based on having “often seen Mary More and Mr. Naylor at the Widow Thomas’s house

⁵⁷ “Mary the neger” testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁵⁸ Alice Carpenter testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

together.”⁵⁹ Peeking in windows may have been less acceptable than eavesdropping, particularly if it meant taking time away from one’s calling, but the kind of spying these men and women reported was not uncommon. Whether motivated by curiosity or vigilance, any indication that an unmarried couple was alone together could attract watchful eyes and gossip was intentionally spread.⁶⁰ In 1675, for example, Mary Wharton was brought to court after her neighbor saw a light in her chamber and looked through the window to see Wharton lying on her bed with Ezekiel Gardiner.⁶¹ This community concern with sexual behavior was probably in part caused by prurience, but information gathering and even spying were sanctioned by a culture that valued rooting out sin and believed that undiscovered transgressions put the whole community in danger.⁶²

“if you love your credit do not keep her company”⁶³
Reputation and Sexual Crimes

Testimony about the reputations of Mary Read and Mary More supported claims of Naylor’s infidelity. Women’s reputations were important evidence in cases of fornication because someone who had committed sins in the past, particularly sexual sins, was considered likely to do so again.⁶⁴ Mary Read could easily be seen as a sympathetic figure in these stories—a young servant seduced or possibly coerced by her master—except for the rumors swirling

⁵⁹ Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records*, 3:226.

⁶⁰ Cott, “Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records,” 22.

⁶¹ Elinor Eborine testimony, 11 January 1675, Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Volume 9, Domestic Relations 1643–1774, 67. Other documents relating to the Wharton case are in Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 65–71.

⁶² Saxton, “Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730,” 65.

⁶³ John and Elizabeth Brooking testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁶⁴ Peter C. Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England 1558–1803* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 10–11, 51; Henigman, *Coming into Communion*, 24–26; Romeo, “The Virtuous and Violent Women of Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” 78–80, 89–94.

through the neighborhood that Mary Read had tried to poison Katherine. The tantalizing details were revealed by Anna Keene, Mrs. Simpkins, Jemima Bisse, George Henley, and Dorcas Woody. Jemima Bisse told Mrs. Simpkins that Read had come to her seeking henbane a few days before Katherine was poisoned, and Anna Keene then overheard Mrs. Simpkins say that she had given Katherine something to counteract the poison.⁶⁵ Mrs. Simpkins had been at the house when Katherine fell ill and told George Henley, one of the Naylor's servants, that Katherine had been poisoned by drinking beer. Henley remembered that Mary Read was drinking beer and laughed when she told him that "they say my mistress is poisoned." Dorcas Woody, perhaps the neighborhood busybody, told Mary that she had heard she poisoned Katherine but Mary denied it. Woody then asked Katherine, who said that she did not know who had poisoned her but that she suspected Read. Woody also told the court that Read had spoken disparagingly of Katherine and of Katherine's housekeeping but that Mary Jackson "informed me quite the contrary" when she lived with the Naylor's.⁶⁶ Testimony to Read's good character came only from the midwife and birth attendants in Hampton, who attested that while she lived there Mary Read was "very diligent in her calling both early and late to maintain her self and her child" and that they never "heard any evil of her by any body."⁶⁷

Mary More's reputation was even more suspect and many people had heard reports of her bad behavior. Several testified to suspicions that Naylor was not Mary More's only illicit

⁶⁵ Henbane is a member of the nightshade family and was used for medicinal purposes but could also be quite poisonous. Hans Sloane, "An Account of Symptoms Arising from Eating the Seeds of Henbane, with Their Cure, &c. and Some Occasional Remarks," *Philosophical Transactions* 38 (1733): 99–101.

⁶⁶ Jemima Bisse testimony, 29 March 1672; George Henley testimony, 30 March 1672; Anna Keene testimony, 7 February 1671/2; Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2; all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁶⁷ Mary Wall, Mary Holis, and Mary Marston testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

relationship. Elizabeth Shute told the court that she and Elizabeth Watts washed linens for her lodger, boatswain William Brown, and once they noticed that Brown's shift had "such tokens as we wondered at and did suspect he had been foul of some woman." Elizabeth Watts confirmed to the court that they had seen the stain on his clothing and "that Mrs. Shute and she together took notice of it." Shute apparently already suspected More and spoke with Mrs. Brookings, with whom Mary lodged, and she said that Mary More told her she was menstruating heavily that week. Shute then confronted Brown and said she "feared he had had to do with Mary More" and that she knew he "frequented her house much."⁶⁸ The Brookings also said that they had seen Mary More with two men she said were sailors employed by her uncle. John Brookings told her "it is not for you to keep such company" and another time Elizabeth gave her similar advice. Mary told the men of the Brookings' warnings and one of them came to the house yelling about it. The Brookings told him "if you love your credit do not keep her company" but the men continued to spend time with her "both night and day as long as the ship stayed."⁶⁹ As her household governors the Brookings seem to have abandoned hope of salvaging More's reputation and instead tried to dissuade men from her company by warning them away. Sexual indiscretions were not Mary More's only vice, according to John Seely, who had encountered her in Nevis when she sought passage to New England on his master's ship. Seely said that he "heard it reported" there that Mary More was drunk and "lay in the highway with her clothes up which was reported by divers." He was careful to note that he had not seen it himself but that he

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Shute and Elizabeth Watts testimony, 5 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁶⁹ John and Elizabeth Brookings testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 5 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

had “heard a general report of her light carriage.”⁷⁰ This information, and testimony that More and Naylor had frequently been seen together in ordinaries and public houses, further damaged More’s reputation. Massachusetts Bay authorities were aware of the links between drunkenness, violence, and sexual crimes. The profligacy of drunkenness and debauchery of adultery were clearly related.⁷¹

**“their house suffered by her coming thither”⁷²
Ordinaries, Inns, and Brothels**

Inns, ordinaries, and taverns were not themselves suspect under normal circumstances but they were tightly regulated and drinking to excess, particularly to the point of visible physical impairment, was punishable. Drunkenness, then as now, was associated with poverty, idleness, and disorder. The perception that drunkards spent money on alcohol that should have been used to support their families, and that time spent tipping in ordinaries and public houses took people away from their callings, made drunkenness a particular target of official moral regulation. Magistrates and ministers also worried about the disorderly activities that could take place in ordinaries, including singing, dancing, gaming, and Sabbath breaking, and about the violence and sexual or property crimes that they knew resulted from excessive drinking.⁷³ Colonial and

⁷⁰ John Seely testimony, 2 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁷¹ See, for example, the case of James Mattock in Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 26–27, 52–53.

⁷² Hannah Hilman testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁷³ Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 142–47; Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 85–86, 103–15; Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England*, 177–83; David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 25–30, 38, 41; Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints*, 152; Increase Mather, *Wo to Drunkards. Two Sermons Testifying against the Sin of Drunkenness* (Cambridge, MA: Marmaduke Johnson, 1673); Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 107–11.

town governments repeatedly passed laws that tried to prevent or curtail disorder in drinking establishments and incentivized informers by offering them a share of fines collected.⁷⁴

Reputable drinking establishments had to be on guard for activities that could undermine their respectability. Edward Naylor and Mary More seem to have pursued their relationship openly in the ordinary run by Mrs. Sherman. Sherman's daughter told Jabez Salter that her mother beat her after she wondered aloud why she "would suffer Mr. Naylor and Mary More to be so often together in the house."⁷⁵ Mary Jackson had also heard from Hannah Baiteman that "Mrs. Sherman lived a sad life" because of the trouble they had with Naylor and Mary More. Mrs. Sherman tried to tamp down gossip about More and Naylor, probably to preserve the reputation of her establishment. She told Hannah Hilman that "their man" caught Naylor and Mary More in their shop and "their neger also told her of it next morning" but that "no body knew of it but they three." The information spread quickly, however, because Hannah told Mary Jackson who told her mistress Katherine Naylor who asked Mrs. Sherman about it. Mrs. Sherman tried to preserve her own reputation by keeping the gossip from spreading, even beating her daughter for talking about More and Naylor.⁷⁶ Mrs. Sherman told Hannah Hilman that she had confronted More and "chid her for keeping of a married man company." Sherman said she had told More that "their house suffered by her coming thither and she came not again of a pretty while." Edward soon found out about the gossip and threatened Mrs. Sherman, and he also took

⁷⁴ See for examples Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:171–72; *Boston Town Records, 1660–1701*, 101. See also Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁷⁵ Jabez Salter testimony, 2 February 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148. Context indicates that the Sherman house was likely an inn or ordinary, though no definitive proof has been located. It is possible this was the same house that entertained General Court members several decades before. See Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 2:116.

⁷⁶ Hanna Hilman testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

the Shermans' man to his wine cellar and gave him drink in exchange for his silence. He also eavesdropped on the women talking about him with Mrs. Sherman.⁷⁷ Naylor and Sherman both had reasons to keep people from talking about his activities, but that did not stop servants like Mary Jackson, Hannah Hilman, Hannah Baiteman, and the unnamed slaves, as well as neighbors like Jabez Salter, from talking about what they saw and heard.

Neighbors also reported that Naylor frequented perhaps the least reputable ordinary in Boston. John Anibal had told the court that Naylor carried on with More in Alice Thomas's shop and house, an observation that carried particular significance since Alice Thomas was the notorious keeper of a brothel in Boston's north end, just around the corner from the Second Church meetinghouse and a short walk from the Naylor house lot. Thomas had taken over the Kings Arms in 1663 after her husband's death and quickly ran afoul of authorities. In January 1671/2, at the same time that testimony was being gathered in the Naylor divorce, Thomas was brought before the Suffolk County court on five separate charges including burglary, selling alcohol without a license, entertaining servants, children, and idle persons, and most scandalously, being "a common baud." The charges claimed that Thomas gave "frequent secret and unseasonable entertainment in her house to lewd lascivious and notorious persons of both sexes, giving them opportunity to commit carnal wickedness." She was sentenced to huge fines, imprisonment, and public humiliation that included being whipped at a cart's tail.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁷ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, and Hannah Hilman testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁷⁸ The following May, the General Court passed a new law in response to "by the bold and audacious presumption of some to erect a stews, whore house, or brothel house, for the nourishing such wickedness, the increase of which evil, if not timely prevented, may tend to the debauching multitudes of persons, and tend to the utter ruin of their estates, soul and body." See chapter 2 of this dissertation and Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1854, 4, part 2:85, 149, 378, 513, 548; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:30, 82–83, 91–92, 126, 266; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:721; Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 112–13; Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England*, 180–81. Some recent popular histories have suggested that Alice Thomas's legal trouble stemmed from her involvement in the Naylor divorce. Peter F. Stevens, *Forgotten Tales of Massachusetts* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 55–59; Dina Vargo, *Wild Women of Boston: Mettle and Moxie in the*

meaning of deponents' references to Thomas's properties would not have been missed by residents of Boston. Entering Thomas's house could only reflect poorly on both Mary More and Edward Naylor.⁷⁹

Naylor also used Thomas's house when he attempted to seduce or rape Mary Jackson, a servant in his household. Jackson had been coming home from her cousin's house one night as the evening bell was ringing and when she came past Thomas's "a man stepped out and caught me about my waist." She turned to find it was Naylor and he tried to get her to join him at Thomas's, but when she refused he "took me up in his arms and carried me in whether I would or no." Naylor left Jackson in a room and went to get wine from his cellar, and "as soon as his back was turned I ran away as fast as I could, no body hindering of me." Jackson went home and told Katherine what had happened but Edward was close behind her and heard part of what she told her mistress. This was not the only time Edward attempted to sexually assault her and Mary Jackson said that her statement to the court "omit[ted] the unseemly carriages he hath proffered to me many times."⁸⁰ Naylor's attempts to coerce Mary Jackson reinforced accusations that he had a sexual relationship with Mary Read, who was also a servant in his house.

Hub (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015), 20–25. The timing rules this out, however. Alice had already been put under a bond of good behavior before October 1671, months before Katherine Naylor petitioned for divorce, and the only extant depositions from the Naylor cases that mention Thomas were taken after she had already been sentenced. The confusion probably stems from a misreading of the dual date system. It is more likely that Edward Naylor's charges in autumn 1672 stemmed in part from the Thomas trial, but unfortunately the documents pertaining to Thomas's case have not been located. See *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:30, 82–83, 126. Documents in the Naylor case that mention Thomas are Elizabeth Shute testimony and Mary Jackson testimony, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148; Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records 1642–1673*, 3:226.

⁷⁹ On the reputation carried by places known for illicit sexual activity, see Gowing, "Freedom of the Streets," 145.

⁸⁰ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

“watch over such as were given to be drinking”⁸¹
Drunkenness and Disorder

Edward Naylor had a reputation for being seen in ordinaries and public houses, and his servants told the court that he frequently came home drunk late at night. Accusations of drunkenness were considered serious insults so the servants were unlikely to make these claims impetuously.⁸² Hanna Allen, Elizabeth Harindine, and Mary Jackson all reported that he regularly came home after midnight, long after the evening bell had signaled that townspeople should return home, and in his drunken state demonstrated all manner of outrageous behavior. He would often make Katherine and the servants get out of bed to “wait on him” and once when Jackson was slow to rise he “came up into the garret where I lay and fired two or three pistols in the garret,” filling it with smoke from the gunpowder and forcing her to get out of bed. Another time he tried to kiss Hanna Allen but she was able to avoid him because “he was so drunk he could not follow me.” Sometimes he was gone for days and they suspected he was either at Alice Thomas’s or in his wine cellar, which was confirmed because “many came to speak with him, and we sent them thither, and there they found him.”⁸³ There is no suggestion that Naylor’s nocturnal activities were reported to or observed by any watching officers who should have been patrolling the streets at night, but perhaps he was protected by his association with the prominent

⁸¹ Pierce, *Salem Church Records*, 154.

⁸² Belief Gridley was punished with whipping and the pillory for “reviling and unnatural reproaching of his natural father” in 1664, and among the insults he used against his father were “drunkard” and “drunken sot.” Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records*, 3:144–45. Joan Hibburd was brought to court and ordered to pay a fine or “make acknowledgment” for “railing and speaking several lies upon Zackary Herek” because she said “he was drunk, and went away from John Stone’s house drunk about one or two o’clock at night.” *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:190, 221.

⁸³ Hanna Allen testimony, 18 January 1671/2; Elizabeth Harindine testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672; Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672; all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

Wheelwright family. After the divorce he found himself in court because watchmen had seen him out late at night on the night of a riot.⁸⁴

While none of the depositions indicate that Naylor had been observed to be drunk outside his home, drunkenness could be a very public offense and observation was easy when it occurred out of doors. Drunken behavior was noted by those who encountered inebriated people in the streets or heard their rowdy behavior. Testimony in church disciplinary records recalled multiple witnesses to the disgrace of drunk men and women who had been found sleeping in the middle of the street or unable to walk, making public spectacles of themselves despite repeated efforts by other members to deal with them privately.⁸⁵ Drunk people in the streets disturbed people in their homes as well. Samuel Sewall recorded an incident when he was perturbed by the drunken revelry of several men in a coach from Roxbury after nine p.m. and he observed they were “singing as they come, being inflamed with drink: At Justice Morgan’s they stop and drink healths, curse, swear, talk profanely and bawdily to the great disturbance of the town and grief of good people.”⁸⁶ Another time Sewall and his neighbors heard “a great uproar and lewd rout in the main street” about nine or ten p.m. and went to their windows “thinking there had been fire,” only to discover the source of the clamor was “drunken raving Gammar Flood.”⁸⁷ Reports of drunken behavior traveled far in New England and sometimes information was sought from miles away. In 1679, James Keith wrote to John Cotton, Jr., from Bridgewater inquiring about

⁸⁴ *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:812.

⁸⁵ *Dorchester First Church Records*, 91, 96–98; *Pierce, Salem Church Records*, 100–102, 153–54; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 3:179–80.

⁸⁶ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:121.

⁸⁷ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:144.

“reports I have very lately heard” about a local man’s drunkenness; Keith was not sure if Cotton was aware of the rumors but he had heard that Cotton’s wife “hath some knowledge of it.”⁸⁸

Drunkenness, like bastardy, created the danger that women and children would become chargeable to the town because a drunk husband might fail to provide for his family. Wives of notorious drunks sometimes relied on neighbors for support after their husbands spent all their money in public houses.⁸⁹ Naylor was no exception. Servants reported that Naylor left the household so short of provisions that they lent money to Katherine to “buy bread and butter and cheese or such like to keep us and the children alive” and according to Mary Jackson, Katherine was once so desperate she went to Goodwife Thomas’s and told her “if she keep my master she must keep us also.”⁹⁰ Dorcas Woody asked Mary Read “the reason why it was reported...that the vittles and every thing should be locked up from her mistress, and she keep the keys” and Read replied that it was “because her mistress was wasteful, and her master ordered they should be locked up.”⁹¹ Keeping necessities inaccessible prevented Katherine from being able to provide for the family, and allowing a servant to keep the keys was major violation of family order since wives were responsible for managing household provisions and that role was symbolized by the possession of the keys.⁹²

⁸⁸ Sheila McIntyre and Len Travers, eds., *The Correspondence of John Cotton Junior* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2009), 246.

⁸⁹ See for examples *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:61–63; 6:297–98.

⁹⁰ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹¹ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹² Ulrich, “A Friendly Neighbor,” 394.

“cruelty and oppression and many abuses”⁹³
Family Violence

Fornication or drunkenness could be observed in streets, ordinaries, and other public places, but Edward’s cruelty was something that Katherine and her children suffered out of the public eye. Like his other transgressions, the use of excessive physical discipline was a sign of Edward’s failure as a household governor. Advice literature was clear that moderate physical correction of children and servants was allowed but a wife was only to be beaten in extreme circumstances, particularly if she provoked her husband, and never in anger or to excess. Massachusetts Bay included a law against wife-beating in their first written legal code in 1641 and they later forbade women beating their husbands as well. Missionaries to the Indians in Massachusetts Bay enforced regulations against marital violence as a mark of progression toward “civilized” marriages. Family violence was understood to be a crime against society because it caused disruption, spread disorder, and violated the covenant upon which the little commonwealth was built. Despite these views on family violence, civil authorities only intervened in the most extreme or dangerous cases and neighbors were the primary check on violent behavior. Cruelty was not considered sufficient cause to grant a divorce and courts often tried to resolve cases without marital separation, but accusations of violence added heft to charges of adultery, drunkenness, or desertion. Neighbors kept watch on families to ensure godly family government and exercised informal influence but they were only expected to intervene to reestablish good order and preserve the godly family.⁹⁴

⁹³ Katherine Naylor petition to the General Court, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹⁴ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 389–90; William Whateley, *A Bride-Bush. Or, A Direction for Married Persons. Plainly Describing the Duties Common to Both, and Peculiar to Each of Them*. (London: Bernard Alsop for Benjamin Fisher, 1623), 106–11; Wadsworth, *Well-Ordered Family*, 37; “The Anatomy of a Woman’s Tongue, Divided into Five Parts,” in *The Harleian Miscellany: Or, a Collection of Scarce, Curious, and Entertaining Pamphlets and Tracts, As Well in Manuscript as in Print, Found in the Late Earl of Oxford’s Library*, vol. 2

Servants were again best positioned to observe Naylor's cruelty. Their depositions told of the violence suffered by the family when Edward returned home late after a night of heavy drinking. Some of the most disturbing stories about the Naylor household concerned the way Edward treated the children when he was drunk. Elizabeth Harindine said that he once took his one-year-old child from his cradle "and threw it down on the floor with a great violence" and when Katherine went outside to the garden Naylor "threw a chair after her." He threw several more chairs at Katherine, Elizabeth, and the child, and then picked up the child and "threw it down in the garden in the snow." Elizabeth picked up the child and asked Naylor "if he were wild to kill his own child."⁹⁵ Neighbors were unlikely to ignore this kind of commotion outside in the middle of the night or to let a ruckus in the street go unwatched. Another case that came before the court showed that neighbors were drawn to look when noises from family violence spilled out into the street. Lidia Clement heard a noise in the street outside her house during a snow storm and she looked out the door to see Daniel Ela chasing his wife Elizabeth down the street "with a cudgel, threatening her, so that she not being quick of foot was in danger."⁹⁶ In the

(London: T. Osborne, in Gray's Inn, 1744), 168; Lawson, *The Duty and Property of a Religious Householder*, 29–31; Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power," 13–15; Amussen, "Being Stirred to Much Unquietness," 71–72; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 41–44; William H. Whitmore, *A Biographical Sketch of the Laws of the Massachusetts Colony from 1630 to 1686* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1890), 51; Whitmore, *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 101; Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 17–18, 21–23; Ann Marie Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 67–68; Ulrich, "Winthrop's City of Women," 42; Ruth H. Bloch, "The American Revolution, Wife Beating, and the Emergent Value of Privacy," *Early American Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 234–35; Pleck, "Criminal Approaches to Family Violence, 1640–1980," 20–23; Saxton, "Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730," 169–80; Crane, *Witches, Wife Beaters, and Whores*, chap. 3; Elaine Forman Crane, *Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 187–89; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 216–17. Pleck found that "in no instance was a divorce granted solely on account of cruelty. Cruelty was grounds for divorce, but only in combination with other grounds, such as adultery and neglect of family." Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny*, 23.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Harindine testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:272–74.

Naylor case, however, no neighbors came forward to report having seen or overheard this or other fights.

Incidents that spilled out into the garden were not typical. More often Naylor's violence was confined behind the house's walls. He whipped his children and kicked them down the stairs, and once made his young daughter stand "stark naked all but her shift about an hour in as cold a night as most came this winter." Another time he refused to let Katherine comfort a child when it was ill. Hannah Allen and Mary Jackson remembered that the children were so terrified by their father that they were afraid to cry even when he whipped them. He made a mockery of the deference children were expected to show their fathers, once making his daughter "curtsey twenty times together as I suppose and he stood and laughed at her." Naylor also directed his ire, and his violence, toward his wife. Mary Jackson testified that one Sunday Naylor had "abused his wife so much in the night before" that Katherine was forced to stay in bed that day and all the next. Jackson had overheard the "disturbance as I lay in bed over their heads."⁹⁷ Another Sabbath day Jackson told her mistress that she would leave because "I was not able to live this life," and Katherine replied, "if you cannot endure it a moment how shall I endure it all my life." Mary Jackson said that she was not detailing all of the abuses she saw because "it would be endless to reckon them up."⁹⁸

Abused wives did have recourse in the courts if they chose to pursue it. Men convicted of beating their wives were often whipped or fined.⁹⁹ A distinction seems to have been drawn

⁹⁷ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹⁸ Hanna Allen testimony, 18 January 1671/2; Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672; both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

⁹⁹ See, for example, *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:158; *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:88, 114; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:233.

between striking with fists or feet and other kinds of violence. John Tillison abused his wife by “throwing a bowl of water upon her” and “chaining her by the leg to the bed post with a plow chain to keep her within doors” and was only admonished.¹⁰⁰ It was also important to prove that a wife had not provoked her husband to violence or to drink.¹⁰¹ Advice literature warned women that wives were likely to provoke their husbands and this could only lead to “but little peace betwixt a man and wife.”¹⁰² Wives should keep silent if their husbands criticized them to avoid “com[ing] to handy gripes.”¹⁰³ The anonymous author of *The Anatomy of a Woman’s Tongue* suggested that a woman’s scolding and nagging could drive a man to “drink away his grief” but also that a wife should remind her husband of the dangers to his reputation if his drinking caused “every little boy, to your disgrace” to “laugh at you, and jeer you to your face.”¹⁰⁴ Although adultery was the most commonly cited form of provocation, in other cases violence against wives went unpunished because the women were considered insubordinate or scolding.¹⁰⁵

Testimonies and depositions explicitly stated that Katherine did not provoke Edward’s behavior and that she tried to perform her duties as a wife despite his cruelty, perhaps indicating that they knew this would be important in the court’s decision.¹⁰⁶ Abused wives had to prove that they did not invite their husbands’ violence by refusing to submit to his authority or by

¹⁰⁰ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:423.

¹⁰¹ Pleck, “Criminal Approaches to Family Violence, 1640–1980,” 26; Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 88.

¹⁰² Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 350.

¹⁰³ Cleaver and Dod, *Godly Form of Household Government*, 230.

¹⁰⁴ “The Anatomy of a Woman’s Tongue, Divided into Five Parts,” 169, 171.

¹⁰⁵ For examples, see *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:231, 233, 490; *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:280–82; 8:272–74; John T. Hassam, ed., *Suffolk Deeds*, vol. 6 (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1892), 135; Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 62; Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 66; Saxton, “Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730,” 172, 177–80.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Harindine testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672; George Henley testimony, 30 March 1672; Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672; all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

failing to fulfill their roles as wives.¹⁰⁷ All the stories about Naylor's cruelty recalled that Katherine avoided provoking her husband while he derided and undermined her domestic labor. Elizabeth Harindine said Edward would make her and Katherine get out of bed in the middle of the night to "wait upon him" and would keep them up all night while they "did all we could to please him but could not do it." One night when Naylor came home at midnight, Katherine had left meat warming for him over a chafing dish and Harindine was in the cellar when she heard the platter crash. She came back up and found the broken dish and meat on the floor. Naylor then demanded Katherine bring him butter and when she brought it, he "threw it on the floor and broke the platter." She brought him more and he threw that on the floor as well, once again breaking an earthenware platter. Mary Jackson said that one washing day he "dragged the sheets off the poles into the dirt" and when she complained he replied "what do I keep you for but to wash them again." Naylor chafed at suggestions that he failed to provide, once abusing his child after Katherine suggested that she lacked the "where with all" to comfort it. He also tried to stop Katherine and the servants from praying in the house on a Sabbath night, saying that "he would have no such thing done in his house, so he neither would pray him self nor suffer any other."¹⁰⁸ The contrast between Naylor's failure to provide both materially and spiritually for the family and his disrespect for Katherine's wifely duties made a mockery of the puritan ideal of marriage based on mutual help and mutual responsibility.¹⁰⁹

Gossip about Naylor's sexual indiscretions was widely shared by men and women in the neighborhood but only servants in the household testified to Edward's drunkenness, violence,

¹⁰⁷ Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Harindine testimony, 2 February 1671/2, 7 September 1672; and Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, "The Covenant Idea and the Puritan View of Marriage," 109, 112.

and cruelty. There is no suggestion that Katherine discussed the abuse with anyone who had not witnessed his behavior and no suggestion that his violence against her was commonly known. The abuse Edward inflicted on his wife and children was not secret—it was known to other members of the household—but neither was it public knowledge. This absence is puzzling since the abuse described by the servants would certainly have been observed or overheard by neighbors. Yet no near neighbors were called to testify about Katherine and the children standing outside in the snow at night, chairs being thrown into the yard, or raised voices coming from the house, and Katherine endured this abuse for several years without seeking remedy before she sought a divorce. Whether out of shame or social expectation, those who knew of the abuse did not tell others and Katherine did not seek help or support from her friends or peers outside the household. There was no cultural imperative to keep this secret, however, if other cases are any indication. Those who endured family violence in seventeenth-century Massachusetts often sought assistance from friends and neighbors to protect and support them even if they hesitated to take their complaints to court.

**“the clamor of it was heard by the neighbors who lived near”¹¹⁰
Getting Help**

Katherine Naylor seems never to have called upon authorities to respond to her husband’s violence and cruelty but she was aware that assistance from her servants helped curtail his abuse. She told Mary Jackson that she “never had so much quiet since I was his wife as I have had since you came, by reason of you talking to him of what you have heard in the town.”¹¹¹ Jackson reported on the gossip she heard about Edward and these reports may have mitigated his violence

¹¹⁰ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 7:381–82.

¹¹¹ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

at least temporarily. Many women who accused their husbands of cruelty enlisted the help of others more directly than did Katherine Naylor. Threats to their own reputations, including the risk of accusations that they failed to meet expectations or fulfill their roles as good wives, may have contributed to wives' reluctance to pursue formal charges against abusive husbands.

Beatrice Berry compared the abuse she suffered to childbirth, saying that she had been "willing to groan under" her husband's abuse rather than "to make a public discovery of his wicked and brutish carriage to me" but now that he had been brought to court she needed to clear her own name.¹¹² Making complaint to an officer of the court was not confidential and could spread news of household discord, and also gave permission to those who had gathered information about the marriage to bring gossip to public attention. Some women did enlist the help of men in positions of authority. Goodwife Prince complained to grand jurymen William Vincen about her husband's violence and drunkenness, saying that "she was afraid of her life" and that "if he killed her her blood would be required at the town's hands." This complaint was not private, however, and Vincen's son-in-law overheard as she "wept very sore so the tears run down her cheeks."¹¹³

When abusive husbands found themselves in court, some wives took blame onto themselves. Elisabeth Ela petitioned the court in her husband's defense after he was charged with abusing her. Elisabeth had complained about "his barbarous usage" toward her but she now told the court that she may have said this "in a passion" and had "nothing against my husband to charge him with."¹¹⁴ Mary Wharton also said she had wronged her husband when she accused him of abuse, saying that she had provoked him to violence with her disobedience and had

¹¹² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 6:297–98.

¹¹³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 6:116.

¹¹⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:272–74.

“hearkened unto evil counsel” that convinced her to bring her complaints to the courts. She also downplayed the severity of his violence, insisting that he had never struck her with a stick or rod “but only with his hand a box on the ear when she too highly provoked him” and that he had only tied her up once, “which was occasioned by her own unruliness.”¹¹⁵ In their hesitancy to complain to authority about abusive husbands, these wives were following the advice in many conduct books that suggested wives should patiently bear abuse. By submitting to abusive husbands, wives could preempt accusations that their unwifely behavior caused the violence and they could also avoid the shame and damage to their reputations that might have resulted from a public airing of their difficulties in court, which would have spread the stories even farther than gossip networks did.¹¹⁶

In many cases the help wives sought was safety or making sure there were witnesses who could support their claims of abuse. The word of neighbors and household members was crucial in proving cruelty and women relied on other women and men to prove allegations by reporting what they knew about the workings of the household and the spousal relationship. Some even displayed the marks of their injuries so that others could testify to having seen bruises. When Thomas Oliver and his wife were brought to court for fighting with each other, Mary Ropes told the court that the Olivers had often called her to their house “to hear their complaints one of the other” and that she “saw Goodwife Oliver’s face at one time bloody and at other times black and blue and that Oliver complained that his wife had given him several blows.”¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Ela tried to escape her husband’s abuse by going to the nearby home of William White and telling

¹¹⁵ Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 69.

¹¹⁶ Saxton, “Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730,” 170–72; Morris, *Under Household Government*, 139; Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*, 137–38.

¹¹⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:90.

him “that her husband had beaten her on the head, held up his knife in his hand and said he would have her heart’s blood, so that she was afraid he would kill her.” Elisabeth told White that he had an obligation to help her since the captain, constable, and grand juryman were not available and insisted that “if you will not entertain me and let me abide in your house I will lie in the street in the snow and if I perish, my blood be upon your head.”¹¹⁸ Neighborliness in the seventeenth-century included a commitment to hospitality and assistance, and Elisabeth Ela seems to have interpreted this to include an obligation to help an abused wife in need.¹¹⁹

Sometimes neighbors brought family violence to the attention of authorities without encouragement from the aggrieved spouse. In June 1673, Samuel Harris of Beverly was presented to the Essex County court for abusing his wife after Mary Woodbery and her daughter Sara told two jurymen about what they had seen and heard of the Harris’ marriage. Mary Woodbery told the court that she had asked Mary Harris about the rumors that her husband sometimes beat her. Harris admitted it was true and then “pulled up her sleeve and showed her arm which was black and blue” from being hit with Samuel’s walking stick; she said that her “her back was a great deal worse.” Samuel had later come to the Woodbery house looking for his wife, who was not there, and when he “began to complain of her for running abroad so much” Woodbery suggested that perhaps she stayed away from the house because of his abuse. He responded by threatening to beat his wife again.¹²⁰

Like Mary Woodbery, neighbors sometimes confronted abusers directly, but there was danger that their intervention could result in retaliation against the abused wife. In March 1647,

¹¹⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:272–74; Romeo, “The Virtuous and Violent Women of Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” 28.

¹¹⁹ Beaver, *Parish Communities and Religious Conflict*, 57; Felicity Heal, “Food Gifts, the Household and the Politics of Exchange in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present* 199 (2008): 41–70.

¹²⁰ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:221, 363.

Richard Prey was fined for swearing, cursing, beating his wife, and contempt of court. Prey's abuse was widely known among neighbors and rumors about Prey's violence were discussed in his presence at the home of Mr. Leader. Leader said that Mrs. Elener had overheard the clamor of their arguments, but Prey accused his wife of telling Elener and struck his wife with a "long stick about the size of a great end of a bedstaff." Jabish Hackett "stepped in and warded off the blow with his arm" and Prey then kicked his wife "against the wall." Another time Hackett had been at supper with several people when one confronted Prey about "cursing and swearing upon a Lord's day when he and his wife stayed at home from meeting." Prey said this was a lie and when his wife corrected him, Prey threw his porridge dish at her, "hitting her upon the hand and wrist, so that she feared her arm was broken." Someone told Prey that "the court would not allow him to abuse his wife so," and he replied that if they tried to stop him "he would cripple her and make her sit on a stool, and there he would keep her."¹²¹

When women intervened in another's marriage, they had to weigh their understanding of patriarchal authority against concern for a wife's safety and well-being. Elizabeth Walter testified that she helped Katherine Naylor after the birth of the Naylor's last child and while Katherine was still lying in, Edward came to Katherine after sundown and told her to go with him to Goodwife Mattock's house, perhaps an unlicensed ordinary, in the rain. Katherine "begged of him he could not carry her out of doors" but he "made her go." It was only after they had been gone two hours that Walter went to the Mattocks' house and asked Edward to let Katherine return home.¹²² A husband who mistreated his wife could be seen to cede his

¹²¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:136.

¹²² Elizabeth Walter testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148. Walter may have been a servant in the Naylor household since she referred to Katherine as "my Mrs.," but her age (52) and the lack of other mentions of the household make it more likely that she was a neighbor.

authority as a household governor, inviting interference from neighbors, household members, and authorities.¹²³

Whether wives intentionally involved neighbors and household members or not, marital disputes were often well known in the community. When Nathaniel Wells and his wife were presented to the Essex County court in 1680, testimony revealed “a great and common fame of breach of the peace, by mutinous carriages,” and that the “neighbors were forced to interpose to prevent further mischief.”¹²⁴ Beatrice Berry also asserted that many of her neighbors could testify to her husband’s “most bitter, inhumane and most ill becoming carriage to me.” She had been forced by his behavior to “go away from him, living where I could get harbor,” presumably with some of these same neighbors who could corroborate her charges of abuse.¹²⁵ The closeness of houses in seventeenth-century Massachusetts towns meant that neighbors could not avoid knowledge of violence in their neighbors’ families. In 1679, William Fanning was brought to court in Essex County for “misdemeanors, excessive drinking, offering violence to his wife, swearing and cursing.” Neighbors heard the couple fighting, saw Fanning throw things at his wife and kick her, and saw the bruises he left on her body. Fanning’s drunkenness was “a common fame” and “the clamor of it was heard by the neighbors who lived near.”¹²⁶ While neighbors may have sometimes hesitated to approach wayward wives or abusive husbands, they sometimes could not avoid knowing about family disorder.

Getting involved in marital disputes often came at a price. Intervening sometimes made things worse by instigating more violence. Husbands sometimes retaliated against those who

¹²³ Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*, 124–30.

¹²⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 7:381.

¹²⁵ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 6:297–98.

¹²⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 7:381–82.

interfered in their marriages. When Mary Parsons confronted William Hannum after she heard that he told a joke about a neighbor's wife-beating, Hannum accused her of using witchcraft to kill his livestock.¹²⁷ Sometimes those who intervened became targets of violence. Mark Quilter was fined by the Essex County court for striking his wife and also striking Rebecca Shatswell after she involved herself in the Quilters' quarrels. Multiple witnesses reported seeing Quilter violently abuse his wife with words and blows, and some women said Goody Quilter had asked them to visit or work in her house, presumably as protection or to act as potential witnesses to the abuse she suffered. Quilter had warned Shatswell not to come to the house or meddle in the marriage and one day "came with violence" in response to her interference and criticism.¹²⁸ Edward Naylor threatened those who talked about his infidelities, including servants in his household and neighbor women, even eavesdropping on their conversations to find out what was being said about him. When Naylor found out that servant Mary Jackson had told Katherine about the rumors regarding him, Alice Thomas, and Mary More, Edward "pick[ed] a quarrel" with Jackson. The information Jackson gathered from her sources in the neighborhood allowed her to keep Katherine informed, but also put them both at risk.¹²⁹ This did not cause neighbors to simply look the other way, however; they chose their times and methods of intervention carefully, and in some cases their watchfulness alone probably helped curtail disruptive behavior.

¹²⁷ "Testimony at Springfield Taken on the Behalf of Sarah the Wife of James Bridgman of Northampton August 11th 1656," Small Manuscript Collection, Harvard Law School Library, Cambridge, MA. I thank Caitlin Galante-DeAngelis Hopkins for bringing this document to my attention.

¹²⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records, Vol. 3*, 3:140–41. See also Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 60–61.

¹²⁹ Mary Jackson testimony, 29 January 1671/2, 7 September 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

“blazing abroad of one another’s infirmities”¹³⁰

Marital Duties and Reputation

Men resented neighbors’ meddling and tried to prevent talk about their misbehavior, despite widespread understanding of the value of watchfulness as the price of godly society. In a petition to the court, Edward Naylor blamed Captain Hutchinson for instigating what he claimed were false accusations against him. Naylor argued that Katherine’s complaint “highly aggravated the said crime far above what ever they were in truth” and this exaggeration resulted in his banishment and the loss of custody of his children. He claimed that while Katherine and Hutchinson had “reaped up such a rabble against me,” he had “not discovered any of my wife’s faults and miscarriages towards me.” He argued they would have stayed lovingly married if not for the “instigation of Captain Hutchinson.”¹³¹ Hutchinson, who had taken many of the depositions in the case in his role as commissioner, was also Katherine’s cousin. Despite Naylor’s claim that Hutchinson instigated the divorce, there is no indication that Katherine intentionally enlisted the help of others, but neither could she hide her suffering from the servants who lived in the household or her humiliation from those who witnessed Naylor’s infidelities. Naylor not only blamed Hutchinson for encouraging Katherine to go public with her grievances, but he also tried to prevent observers from talking about what they had seen. By eavesdropping on women’s conversations and trying to intimidate those who talked about his activities, Naylor was subverting gossip and watchfulness as a way of trying to protect his reputation. Evidence presented in the case showed that men who had observed Naylor and Mary

¹³⁰ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 251–52.

¹³¹ Edward Naylor petition to the General Court, 12 October 1672, Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 62.

More together were sometimes taken to Naylor's wine cellar and given drink in exchange for their silence.¹³²

In contrast to Naylor's accusations that Katherine stirred up bad opinions about him, depositions that supported Katherine's claims of infidelity and cruelty gave no indications that Katherine had talked to others about her plight. Women speaking against their husbands could be seen as violating the patriarchal family structure.¹³³ When Anna Keene petitioned to be free from her marriage to Edward Lane on the grounds of impotence, she was careful to note that she had endured it "without imparting my grief to my nearest friends" and had helped him seek "more private help" by encouraging him to pursue "remedy by physick." It was only Lane himself who revealed his "infirmity" to others.¹³⁴ Petitioning for a divorce brought these kinds of details into public view, however. In 1662/3 Mary White sought a divorce from her husband Elias on ground of impotence and he was interrogated about his sex life by several men in front of his wife.¹³⁵ The details of Naylor's behavior that became clear during the divorce and his subsequent trial were not all widely known beforehand. Neighborhood talk as revealed in the divorce and trial proceedings indicates that there were community norms about what a wife was allowed to reveal and what she was meant to keep secret about her husband and her marriage.

Neighbors had heard about the drunkenness and disputes in the Naylor household, and Dorcas Woody heard that "Mr. Naylor and his wife lay not together," but none reported in their testimonies that they had heard about his violence or cruelty toward either Katherine or the

¹³² Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records*, 3:226; Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹³³ Saxton, "Being Good: Moral Standards for Puritan Women, Boston: 1630–1730," 165–66.

¹³⁴ Anna Lane petition to Court of Assistants, March 1658, Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 32.

¹³⁵ Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 43–46.

children unless they had witnessed it directly.¹³⁶ No extant testimonies indicate that Katherine's older children, who would have been eleven and thirteen years old, testified or reported the violence toward their mother and half-siblings.¹³⁷ Nothing in the testimonies presented to the court suggests that Katherine publicized Edward's behavior or criticized him to others, except for two instances when she reached a breaking point: once when she went to Alice Thomas's demanding financial assistance, and once when she confronted Mrs. Sherman about rumors that had reached her about Naylor's infidelity. The depositions do not indicate any pleas for help from Katherine or evidence that she was telling other wives about the abuse. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has suggested that the depositions came from servants and workmen while Katherine's social peers were silent because she did not tell her friends about the abuse "out of shame or fear."¹³⁸ But it is also possible that servants' testimony meant that those more elite women could hold their tongues, that servants were more accustomed to sharing these kinds of intimate household details among themselves and with their mistresses, and that Katherine told others about her situation who did not testify. In any event, all those who did provide evidence were either eye or ear witnesses to Edward's misbehavior or heard others talking about it, rather than having been enlisted directly for support by Katherine herself. No evidence indicates that she ever summoned the constable, that she ran to neighbors or family for protection, or that she asked anyone to intervene when her husband was violent.

¹³⁶ Dorcas Woody testimony, 29 January 1671/2, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹³⁷ Testimony indicates that Mary Nanny was living in the home but Samuel was not mentioned in the case. Katherine's children with Edward would only have been three and four years old. Mentions of Mary Nanny are in Mary Turill testimony and Mary Little Testimony, both in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹³⁸ Ulrich, "Big Dig, Little Dig, Hidden Worlds: Boston."

Advice literature indicates that these distinctions were probably made on the basis of both shame and threats to the husband's credit and reputation. These works specified that husbands and wives should take care in the ways they spoke about their spouses to others. Authors made clear that men had a lot to fear from their wives' words if women were imprudent in their speech. Wives had intimate knowledge that could damage a man's reputation and the "publishing of each other's sins and imperfections, is a monstrous treachery." Spouses should be sure not to "delight to discover unto others, and spread abroad the infirmities, and imperfections of one another, or any thing that may tend to the discredit of either of them: but rather cover and conceal them as much as they may with good conscience." William Gouge warned against the "blazing abroad of one another's infirmities," which he said was common when "tattling gossips meet" and when "husbands meet with their boon companions." Talking about one another's faults was dangerous because spouses knew each other so well that they "may much discredit one another." Robert Cleaver and John Dod warned that a woman should be a "house-wife, not a street-wife, one that gaddeth up and down." A woman who went "clattering amongst her gossips," William Whateley said, were like "ill birds that defile their own nests; and mad folks that uncover each others nakedness, and fling dung in the faces of other." Husbands and wives should notify their spouses if they heard evil rumors and if the rumors were true should help each other reform and repent. Both husbands and wives had an obligation to avoid listening to gossip or criticisms about their spouses since their open ears would only encourage more destructive talk, and spouses should protect each other's good credit and fame as though it were their own. It was not enough for a wife to be silent and obedient in her husband's presence; she must also be careful not to speak ill of him behind his back. In some circumstances it might be acceptable

for a spouse to speak in secret to one trusted friend, but they should be careful to avoid having it “blaz’d and nois’d among the neighborhood.”¹³⁹

Men were motivated to prevent talk about their behavior by the threat of social and financial costs that could result from bad reputations. Being publicly outed as an abuser, and therefore a poor household governor, would have shamed a man whose reputation mattered not only in social relationships but also in economic ones.¹⁴⁰ Philip Wharton petitioned the Court of Assistants for divorce from his wife because he claimed to have been “in a manner forced into an exiled state and driven from his own home through the sore afflictions and very deep sufferings brought upon him...by the false charges and accusations of a lying treacherous woman, who sometime covenanted with him as a wife.” He reminded the court that she had “untruly” charged him with cruelty, neglect, and “too great familiarity with another woman” and that she had since recanted and admitted that “she herself was the blamable person.”¹⁴¹ Suing for divorce was a way for Wharton to counter the accusations his wife had lodged against him and restore his reputation, thereby restoring his ability to make a home and a living.

The divorce case had brought Edward Naylor’s failings as a household governor into the public eye repeatedly, first in the immediate aftermath of Katherine’s petitions when multiple witnesses were called to give depositions or testimonies. Edward wrote a letter to Katherine in June 1672, after the divorce but before the criminal trial, in which he implied that he hoped for

¹³⁹ Whateley, *A Bride-Bush*, 77–79; Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 248–52, 285–86; Cleaver and Dod, *Godly Form of Household Government*, 223; Wadsworth, *Well-Ordered Family*, 35.

¹⁴⁰ Ann Little has argued that husband-abuse trials would have served the same function as skimmingtons in old England. While husband-beating was a more serious threat to puritan masculinity than being an abuser, revealing to the community his failure to order his family appropriately could certainly have damaged his reputation. Ann 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 Bellesiles (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁴¹ Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 65.

reconciliation and claimed to be repentant for “my unnatural dealing with thee.” He also asked her to send him clothes and shoes. He ended by describing himself as “despised of many though not by all god be praised but pitied by some and by thee I hope.”¹⁴² He recognized the damage that had been done to his reputation by the divorce but worse was to come in the criminal case against him and he probably hoped that she, like other abused wives, might recant and take blame to herself for his actions.

Those testimonies from February 1671/2 were then owned in court and more were taken during Edward’s trial in September 1672.¹⁴³ After his conviction Edward was banished from within ten miles of Boston and a month after the testimonies were taken in the case of cruelty and fornication against him, he petitioned the Court of Assistants asking for his banishment to be lifted because it left him “not in a capability to comply with any of my creditors,” who were by now bringing his debts to court, nor to “fit myself for a voyage to sea.” He promised to “be in good behavior during his abode in that time in Boston: towards all persons especially his late wife.”¹⁴⁴ In a separate petition to the General Court he said that the divorce and banishment left him “as bad as buried alive or outlawed.” He argued that he did not deserve the “cruel and unnatural usage from her” that he had endured in the divorce, and that he “never discovered any of my wife’s faults nor provocations of me, which...occasioned all or the most of my unkindness to her.” The closest Edward came to admitting the charges of infidelity against him came in this petition, in which he stated that “If I did commit fornication (which I did not) it was several years before I was complained of by my wife although she knew as much of it before as since.”

¹⁴² Edward Naylor to Katherine Nanny Naylor, 29 June 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹⁴³ Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

¹⁴⁴ Edward Naylor petition to Court of Assistants, 11 October 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

He claimed that she had complained to him of “several misusages” but they had been reconciled before he went to sea and “I thought little of finding her my enemy at my return.”¹⁴⁵ After his attempts at reconciliation failed, he sought to use his petitions to blame Katherine for their marital troubles and in some way rescue his reputation and credit. He was given liberty to reenter the town if he provided a bond for good behavior, but about eighteen months later he had to forfeit that bond after “intruding into his late wife’s Katherine Nanny’s company.”¹⁴⁶

Both Katherine and Edward lobbed accusations that the other was failing to live up to gendered marital duties—witnesses provided evidence to support her claims that he was a poor household governor and created disorder in the household with his cruelty, drunkenness, failure to provide, and sexual exploits. He claimed she spoke to others about him and damaged his reputation. But only Katherine had witnesses that backed her claims. Katherine’s petitions and the testimony that supported them demonstrated to the courts that Edward did not quell disorder as he should have done, but instead he was the source of it. Servants reported that everyone in the household tried to live peacefully but he would not let them. Even his children tried not to cry when he whipped them. Katherine dutifully cooked and cleaned for him, took care of the children, and prayed with her family, while Edward drank to excess, spent time in public houses, came home late, committed “unseemly carriages” with servant girls, frequented a bawdy house, and racked up debts. She had not challenged his authority or threatened his reputation by telling

¹⁴⁵ Edward Naylor petition to the General Court, 12 October 1672, Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 62.

¹⁴⁶ Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 61; Cronin, *Court of Assistants Records*, 3:225; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company* 4, part 2:549; Noble, *Court of Assistants Records*, 1:32.

others about the drinking and abuse, while he had publicly conducted an illicit sexual relationship and brought shame on the household by impregnating a servant.¹⁴⁷

* * *

Katherine was granted a divorce and Edward Naylor was found guilty of “inhumane carriage and cruelty in abusing his wife and children” along with “most uncivil carriage with Mary More.” A conviction for fornication would be added if the oaths of Read and other witnesses were proven.¹⁴⁸ Edward’s conviction, and Katherine’s ability to keep her home and inheritance from her previous marriage, hinged on the testimony of neighbors and servants who observed and gossiped about the inner workings of the Naylor household. Naylor’s transgressions and Katherine’s innocence were proved by witnesses who intentionally collected information by spying, eavesdropping, and interrogating others. Details about Edward’s transgressions and the reputations of Mary Read and Mary More circulated in Boston, Hampton, Charlestown, and even Nevis, but at heart this was a story about neighbors and servants, the close quarters of seventeenth-century Boston, and its windows, doors, streets, and wharves. It was also a story about women, their conversations, and their movements. Men were not excluded from gossip networks or averse to spying, but the testimony that ultimately protected Katherine and her children came from women, both neighbors and servants as young as eighteen years old, and that information was gathered as they worked and socialized in homes, streets, and wharves. Family and male authority were not unimportant, as evinced by the role of Katherine’s

¹⁴⁷ According to Wilson, “The worst that a disgruntled wife could do, even in a marriage characterized by loving partnership, was to challenge a man’s authority as family head” since his credit would be damaged “if familial conflict became public.” Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Edward Naylor verdict, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, Volume 12, File 1148.

cousin Edward Hutchinson, but his efforts on her behalf could not have been successful without the words of women.

While wives were sometimes reluctant to pursue formal charges against their husbands, outsiders' interest in marriages allowed them to provide vital evidence when officials could no longer look the other way. Katherine lived with Edward's cruelty, drunkenness, and adultery for years before she sought a divorce, and when she came to court she was supported by the memories of eye and ear witnesses who had been taking notice of Edward's behavior. While family members certainly knew about the violence and cruelty she suffered, it was neighbors and servants rather than kin who offered testimony on her behalf. Servants were particularly positioned to observe and share information because they were in the household but not subject to the same loyalties. It was expected that servants would keep secrets, but they also needed to protect themselves. In cases of family violence or disorder and sexual impropriety in particular, young female domestic servants were in danger of being victimized, and so they also may have identified with their mistress in cases of female cruelty or they may have resented their mistress's treatment. Female domestics hired from neighboring households had local kin to whom they were loyal and whom they trusted, and with whom they could share information about the doings inside the household where they labored. Their side of the story is explored in the next chapter.

From servants to mistresses to masters and magistrates, even the most "private" abuses could become public knowledge even when they took place behind closed doors rather than in the streets, taverns, or doorways. If the ideal marriage in seventeenth-century England was one "whose workings were not visible to the rest of the neighborhood," the ideal marriage in New

England was one that did not have secrets.¹⁴⁹ The workings of the household in puritan Boston were public by both design and circumstance, and secrecy or concealment were indications that ungodly behavior was happening within. Divines regularly reminded churchgoers that their sins could not be concealed from God and that attempts to keep secrets indicated “an unregenerate heart.” Trying to hide ungodly behavior would not only compound their sin but also risked the well-being of the community as a whole.¹⁵⁰ While wives may have been reluctant to charge their husbands with cruelty or to seek a divorce, there was little incentive for them to keep others’ mouths quiet. Husbands, however, had much to lose from the talk of others and tried to prevent gossip that could harm their reputations as good household governors and thereby harm their credit as trustworthy men. Similarly, those who wittingly or unwittingly assisted in the commission of sins, such as ordinary keepers, had to decide whether gossip would cause more harm than the later discovery of concealment. For husbands and wives, servants and masters, innkeepers and tipplers, gossip could be a two-edged sword that had the potential to damage reputations but also to protect them from harm while protecting the community at large from divine threat.

¹⁴⁹ Amussen, “Being Stirred to Much Unquietness,” 77.

¹⁵⁰ Hoffer and Hull, *Murdering Mothers*, 49.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mistress, Housemaid, Daughter, Spy: Servants and Household Gossip

The servants who found themselves at the center of the Nanny-Naylor divorce case were not unique. Servants, and particularly female household servants, had access to intimate spaces and knowledge that could be valuable sources of watchfulness when transgressions occurred behind closed doors. Observing others in the household was not particularly difficult. Visitors to a surviving seventeenth-century home in Massachusetts on a quiet afternoon will probably notice how sound carries from room to room. Standing in an upstairs bedchamber, one can easily hear a tour guide answering questions in the kitchen or hall below. This impression is confirmed by architectural research on early New England houses which shows that privacy was difficult to find in dwellings constructed of wood, in which “knotholes and cracks served as peepholes for the curious” and a lack of soundproofing or insulation between rooms and around the central chimney allowed sound to carry.¹ Someone could easily eavesdrop on conversations in the next room.² Most houses had no more than four rooms, meaning that rooms served multiple functions and it would have been rare to be alone in one of them. Bed curtains might have limited watching eyes but keeping conversations “private” would certainly have meant hushed voices or whispers, staying up late into the night, or taking talk out of doors to a field or garden. Relatively private outdoor spaces would have been easier to find; most house lots were

¹ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 43.

² See, for example, the Martha Beamsley’s deposition about what she overheard Henry Kembole say to her husband in the next room, in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #591. On early New England architecture, see chapter 3 of this dissertation.

about an acre, except in the more densely settled Boston, but even in larger towns there were still ample outdoor spaces, outbuildings, and work sites that were sparsely attended after dark. However, concerns about defense and religious conformity dictated that house lots be near meetinghouses and this meant that neighbors were unlikely to be far away in the first half of the seventeenth century, especially in larger port towns.³ Despite the physical and cultural circumstances that mitigated against privacy, servants managed to find ways to cultivate social lives separate from the household and both servants and mistresses tried to keep some words and actions away from others' eyes and ears.

Servants had incentive to rely on gossip's potential use for informal community policing and sanction. Their subordinate positions made it more difficult for them to access official channels such as church discipline or magistrates, and even those who came from economically secure families lacked the protection that blood ties to their households could provide. Youth also mitigated against their ability to rely on authorities for protection without assistance from others and approaching magistrates or court officials to complain about masters or mistresses could be seen as a breach of the hierarchy that cemented the social order. Servants seem to have been unlikely to report transgressions to watching officers on their own but they were able to provide detailed corroborating testimony when called upon by authority. Surveillance and gossip could thus be a strategy of resistance, one of the few ways for servants to defend themselves against ill treatment or false accusations, and cultural and religious encouragement of

³ Mary Thomas Crane, "Illicit Privacy and Outdoor Spaces in Early Modern England," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9 (2009): 4–22; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 26–31, 35, 42–44.

watchfulness complicated masters' and mistresses' desires to avoid being surveilled by their subordinates.⁴

Servants' religious beliefs can be hard to determine from extant records, but their uses of watchfulness were probably motivated as much by safety and power as by spiritual imperative. While some servants reported being home on the Sabbath while their families were at the meetinghouse, many servants probably attended meetings with their households and servants could be baptized and admitted to church membership. In keeping with the puritan emphasis on family and social hierarchy, their status as servants was often noted in the membership lists, and sometimes they appear to have been set higher standards than other members.⁵ Being church members in full communion meant that servants were also subject to the imperative to holy watchfulness written into church covenants. This points to a fundamental conflict in New England churches, one that came into play for anyone other than a free, white, householding male: what to do when covenanted relationships—servitude, marriage, or otherwise—conflicted with the church covenant. Servants who became church members faced contradictory imperatives to be faithful to their masters, which required keeping secrets, avoiding eavesdropping, and keeping family business private, while also participating in the regime of protective watchfulness. Servants were rhetorically exalted while remaining socially subordinate. In the same way that both male and female church members were meant to consider themselves “brides of Christ,” all Christians were expected to think of themselves as

⁴ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 170–72; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), esp 141-145.

⁵ Other dependents were also described relationally—women were described as daughters or wives, children were connected to their parents. Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, vol. 1: 1681–1709 (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1911), 278.

servants of God regardless of their social status.⁶ If the church covenant in fact put servants on the same footing as their masters in the eyes of God, that equalizing tendency had ambiguous boundaries. Servants' social subordination might begin or end at the meetinghouse door, in the streets of the village, or at the doors of the homes they shared with their masters and mistresses. Church members were told to watch each other but servants watching over their masters complicated the hierarchy that structured and ordered society and so servants, like other dependents, were subordinates first and church members second. The watchful supervision they experienced and practiced was structured primarily by the status inherent in their positions, whether church members or not.

Servant gossip was fraught not only because of its consequences for hierarchical relationships but also for practical reasons. Servants' unique access to household secrets and their unsupervised social lives led to fears that servant gossip could damage reputations or even livelihoods, and these fears were not unfounded.⁷ Their gossip was spread both in the course of their work and in the social circles they maintained apart from the families in which they lived, and information they shared about the households in which they labored easily made its way to friends and neighbors in other households and even other towns. Servants often appeared as witnesses in court cases where their ability to observe or overhear their social betters provided critical evidence. Whether by coincidence of being present during conversations, by intentional

⁶ Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 118–24; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Nursing Fathers and Brides of Christ: The Feminized Body of the Puritan Convert,” in *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America*, ed. Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 129–43; Elisabeth Ceppi, *Invisible Masters: Gender, Race, and the Economy of Service in Early New England* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2018).

⁷ Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 64–65; Pollock, “Living on the Stage of the World,” 86.

eavesdropping and spying, or by acting as confidants to other members of the household, servants had access to the secret activities and conversations that took place around them.

Information gathering could also be an act of self-protection since servants were vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation. Observing the activities of their households may have provided some safety, but servants were also subject to scrutiny and gossip about their own activities that could have devastating consequences. Servants' positions as members of the household but not of the family meant that gossip about them could jeopardize their placements and their limited support networks. The stakes of gossip for servants were therefore high, whether they were carriers or subjects of talk. While servants' talk about their households was a concern for masters and mistresses in New England, talk about servants was a vital way of maintaining order. Servants had the potential to be a disorderly force in society and keeping a watchful eye on them protected households and the community from scandal and dishonor. When a servant reported on his master's behavior, the servant's own reputation was as important as the master's in determining who would be believed. Because a servant's behavior reflected on the master, a servant's good reputation could be the subject of litigation. In some cases the servants were specifically accused of undermining the reputations of the households in which they served. Servants' words and the contexts in which they were uttered were at the forefront in these court cases, revealing the way that their conversations traveled and the perceived dangers of their errant words.

The cases in which servants' words and words about servants entered official records through the pens of ministers and court secretaries represents a tiny fraction of the words that were actually circulating. Servants talking and listening, being observed and overheard, were a major component of the oral and aural landscape of New England and much occurred in

circumstances that cannot be recovered. Servants' ability to be present in a variety of settings, their mobility in towns and villages, and their associations with other households as kin, friends, and laborers made them part of a complex set of relationships through which information flowed. Their ability to use gossip was tempered by their vulnerability to it and the potential for their own character to be interrogated if they spoke out. Those networks, those listening ears, and those wagging tongues could operate to the benefit or detriment of both servants and masters, making regulation of servants' speech a tricky proposition.

* * *

A perennial problem in scholarship on New England servitude is that the terms used to describe and categorize them were and are ambiguous. The term "servant" could encompass those formally indentured into service or apprenticeship, those ordered into service because of poverty or as criminal punishment, adults who voluntarily became servants, and children who were "put out" to service, as well as those of African or Indian descent who were enslaved or whose service blurred the line between servitude and slavery.⁸ What records remain indicate that

⁸ One challenge for determining the extent to which households employed servants is the frequent equation of indenture with servitude. The problem is evident in many book indices, such as that of Alan Taylor's *Colonial America*, in which the entry for "servants" says "see indentured servitude." Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, The Penguin History of the United States (New York: Penguin Books, 2002). On the labor shortage in New England, see Anderson, *New England's Generation*, 157; Lawrence William Towner, "A Good Master Well Served: A Social History of Servitude in Massachusetts 1620–1750" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1955), 5. On different categories of servant, see Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Boyd of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures on the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland for B. Eliot and D. Henschman, 1726), 614; Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 100; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 109–12; Towner, "Good Master Well Served," 54–57, 75, 84, 90. On African and Indian servants and slaves, see Warren, *New England Bound*; Newell, *Brethren by Nature*; Margaret Ellen Newell, "The Changing Nature of Indian Slavery in New England, 1670–1720," in *Reinterpreting New England Indians and the Colonial Experience*, ed. Colin G. Calloway and Neal Salisbury (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2003), 106–36; Joshua Micah Marshall, "Settling Down: Labor, Violence and Land Exchange in the Anglo-Indian Settlement Society of Seventeenth-Century New England, 1630–1692" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2003); David J. Silverman, "The Impact of Indentured Servitude on the Society and Culture of Southern New England Indians, 1680–1810," *New England Quarterly* 74 (2001): 622–66; Michael L. Fickes, "'They Could Not Endure That Yoke': The Captivity of Pequot Women and Children after the War of 1637," *New England Quarterly* 73 (2000): 58–81; Bernard J. Lillis, "Forging

most servants were young people from poorer English families, and there were small but significant numbers from Ireland and Scotland as well as Indians and Africans, whose presences in household and agricultural servitude increased as the century went on.⁹ Most studies of servants focus on those who were formally indentured (or purchased, in the case of Indians and Africans) and therefore left behind documentation of their terms of service. Indentured servants were usually contracted in England prior to migration and were often strangers rather than adolescents from neighboring families, disproportionately male, and employed in husbandry or as artisan apprentices.¹⁰ Although some women were indentured, their service was more often informally contracted. The focus on indentures has defined servitude in a way that erases or obscures women's work, both that of wives and daughters and that of female workers hired into the household.¹¹

Household or domestic service was the primary form of servitude for women and girls. The prevalence of domestic servants, primarily young women who spent much of their day working in the household and tending to the family's most intimate needs, is not well understood in seventeenth-century New England. They appear with some frequency in diaries, letters, church records, and court cases, but there is no systematic way to trace the extent of service in

New Communities: Indian Slavery and Servitude in Colonial New England, 1676–1776” (Honors thesis, Wesleyan University, 2012).

⁹ Demos, *A Little Commonwealth*, 69–74, 107–11; Towner, “Good Master Well Served,” 140–48; Warren, *New England Bound*; Newell, *Brethren by Nature*.

¹⁰ See, for example, David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28; Marcus Wilson Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607–1783* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1931); Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), Part II; Abbot Emerson Smith, *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607–1776* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1947); David W. Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹¹ On the erasure of women's labor, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

early Massachusetts for those who were not formally indentured.¹² Female household servants were typically young women who were bound out to neighboring families during what we would now call their adolescent years and stayed in service for terms that varied in length from one to seven years or until they reached marriageable age.¹³ The terms of their service also varied. Some were paid annual wages while others had arrangements akin to indenture contracts, and still others of African and Indian descent were bound for life and purchased rather than contracted.¹⁴ Among those who were not purchased, nearly all female servants lacked formal indentures and were usually engaged through oral agreements with household mistresses.¹⁵ In one minister's household, several servants came for trial periods or to help with seasonal tasks, while others stayed year after year and negotiated whether they would remain.¹⁶ The lack of formal indenture contracts, the tendency to use the word "maid" to mean either a servant or an unmarried woman, and the ambiguity of references to "living with" a household to mean either lodgers or servants can often mean that conjecture is required to identify household servants.

The few histories that have addressed female servants have assumed that service was a common experience for New Englanders, either as servants or as members of households where

¹² Anderson, *New England's Generation*, 109n32. On the numbers and significance of indentured servants, particularly in the initial migration, see Anderson, 24; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 169.

¹³ Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 97–99; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 57. Historians have several explanations for this process, ranging from economic to educational to psychological. See for examples Demos, *A Little Commonwealth*, 69–75; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, chap. 5; Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 12.

¹⁴ Peter Thacher recorded the purchase of an Indian maid and an African man in his journal, in contrast to the annual wages he paid his servant Lidea Chapin. On Peg and Ebed, Thacher's slaves, see Peter Thacher diary typescript, 2:26–27, typescript P-186, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA. For Lidea's annual wages, see Peter Thacher diary typescript, 1:30; Peter Thacher diary typescript, 2:i, ii, 21, 47, 105. See also Samuel Green, "Diary of Lawrence Hammond," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Second Series, 7 (1892): 146, 159, 160, 164.

¹⁵ For an example of an informal agreement, see Green, "Diary of Lawrence Hammond," 146.

¹⁶ Peter Thacher diary typescript, 1:66, 73, 116, 117, 146, 202–3, 226.

servants were present.¹⁷ While there have not been any systematic studies of female domestic service in early New England, some inferences are possible based on studies of similar populations in England.¹⁸ Huge numbers of young people were in servitude for some period of time in early modern England; some historians estimate that up to sixty percent of people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were servants for some part of their lives, and that even humble households often had at least one servant. But they also agreed that domestic servants were typically “near the bottom of the social hierarchy: female, single, young, ill-paid, and of lowly birth.”¹⁹ Women and girls in service were subordinates as females and as servants, so the structure of puritan patriarchal society intensified the dependence and vulnerability of these young women. They were also able to use their access to the household in which they labored, and the information passed to them by other servants about other households, to gather and share gossip that could have significant consequences for themselves and others.

“a sort of spies, upon the houses of your masters”²⁰
Servant Gossip about Households

Masters and mistresses not only knew that servants were privy to the activities of the household, they also relied on it. Servants were trusted to carry written messages and also to

¹⁷ Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 227; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 109; Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 157; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 60–61.

¹⁸ The best study of female domestic servants in England is Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender 1660–1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2000). See also Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*.

¹⁹ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 127–28.

²⁰ Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served: A Brief Discourse On the Necessary Properties and Practices Of a Good Servant In Every Kind of Servitude: And of the Methods That Should Be Taken by the Heads of a Family, to Obtain Such a Servant* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1696), 37.

relay information orally to their masters' and mistresses' relations.²¹ Henry Paynter used two of his former servants, James Woodyeates and his wife, to deliver a letter to John Winthrop Jr. in March 1632/33 and noted that the servants "can inform you of our affairs."²² On the other hand, servants' knowledge could be dangerous. In 1643, William Clark was sentenced to whipping for "spying into the chamber of his master and mistress, and for reporting what he saw."²³ While they may have sent servants on errands to carry information, masters and mistresses also tried to control what information servants shared about their households. Servants who had compromising information about their employers were in a position to upend the lines of power that ordered the household.²⁴

Warnings about servant morality and fears about servants' ability to observe bad behavior in the household were rampant in household advice literature from seventeenth-century England and New England that included detailed descriptions of the reciprocal duties of masters and servants.²⁵ Authors of advice manuals made clear that both servants and masters were able to observe each other's behavior, but while masters and mistresses were encouraged to surveil their servants, servants were warned against taking advantage of words or actions they might observe in the household. Servants were told to be obedient and respectful, to monitor their own behavior, and to provide good examples to other servants and to their masters' children.²⁶ Many

²¹ For example, see Peter Thacher diary typescript, 1:13. Katherine Grandjean has shown that Indian messengers were vital to the maintenance of communications in New England. Grandjean, *American Passage*. See also Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 37, 41, 62, 64, 74, 97, 100, 120, 121.

²² *Winthrop Papers, 1631–1637*, vol. 3 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1943), 109.

²³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:58.

²⁴ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 191.

²⁵ For discussions of advice literature and the "moral supervision" of servants, see Gowing, 150; Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender*, 37–40. On the timing of advice literature in New England and changing perceptions of the family as a moral regulator, see Lawrence W. Towner, "'A Fondness for Freedom': Servant Protest in Puritan Society," *William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (1962): 205; Towner, "Good Master Well Served," 331–32.

²⁶ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 629.

advice manuals also specifically instructed servants to avoid gossiping about their masters. William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties* noted that servants were in a position to know their masters' secrets because of their "near and continual abiding together, and the many employments which masters have for their servants." It was a "common fault," he said, for servants to fail to keep their masters' secrets and instead go "blabbing abroad all such things as servants know concerning their masters." When servants met with those from other households, "all their talk for the most part is of their masters and mistresses, whereby it cometh to pass that all the secrets of an house are soon known about the whole town or city." These servants, he wrote, were like "treacherous spies."²⁷ In *Godly Forme of Household Government*, Robert Cleaver and John Dod listed among the many attributes of "a good maid-servant" that she "have skill...chiefly in holding her peace" and that all servants should avoid "tales telling."²⁸ Richard Baxter listed among servants' duties to their masters that they should "be as faithful behind their masters' backs as before their faces" and should not "reveal the secrets of the family abroad, to strangers or neighbors."²⁹ Cotton Mather insisted that servants should "speak reverently of your masters" and "preserve the honor of your masters abroad, as well as at home; and be not a sort of spies, upon the houses of your masters, to carry tales abroad, whereby they may be defamed."³⁰

There was danger that servants' errant talk could damage their masters' reputations and their livelihoods. Benjamin Wadsworth warned servants that "telling false tales and stories out of the house" would "greatly hurt their masters and mistresses in their credit, reputation and

²⁷ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 628–33.

²⁸ Cleaver and Dod, *Godly Form of Household Government*.

²⁹ Richard Baxter, *Mr. Baxters Rules & Directions for Family Duties* (H. Brugis for J. Conyers in Duck Lane, 1681).

³⁰ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 37.

business.”³¹ Samuel Cradock echoed these sentiments, noting that among the duties of servants was to “preserve (by all good means) the reputation of their master and his family; and not like idle tale-bearers, divulge every thing done in the house.”³² Cotton Mather warned that “you must beware of betraying the secrets of your masters, or injuring the nests where you lodge.”³³ The only exception was one that would have loomed large in puritan communities; Gouge allowed that a servant could break confidence when a master or mistress revealed “such a sin as may tend to the ruin of the family, and that by the knowledge thereof, the party that is not blinded and besotted with the sin, but rather free from it, may be a means to redress it.”³⁴ That the advice manuals were so explicit in their instructions against gossiping indicates that servants’ presence in the household created real or perceived threats to the master and his family. These warnings became more explicit over time and later manuals seem much more concerned with servants’ gossip and tale-telling, indicating that the manuals’ authors were trying to impose restrictions on behavior they observed around them and were trying to contain servants’ unruly speech about their masters.³⁵ The behavior and conversations of masters and their families were “secrets” that should not be exposed, servants still needed to keep watch over the households in which they served, to support good family government by reporting on any ill behavior on the part of their fellow servants, and provide good examples to other servants and to the household’s

³¹ Wadsworth, *Well-Ordered Family*, 117–18. Cornelia Hughes Dayton pointed to a shift at the turn of the century toward a concern with credit and reputation rather than neighborhood “honor” in business relationships, so the timing of Wadsworth’s book is significant. Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*.

³² Samuel Cradock, *Knowledge and Practice: A Plain Discourse of the Chief Things Necessary to Be Known, Believ’d, and Practiced in Order to Salvation. Useful for Private Families.*, 3rd edition (London: William Grantham, Henry Mortlock, and William Miller, 1673), 29.

³³ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 44, 47.

³⁴ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 628–33. This caveat does not appear in any of the other advice manuals surveyed. Perhaps the passage of time made Gouge’s recommendation seem unwise.

³⁵ Don Herzog, *Household Politics: Conflict in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 160. See also Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 35–38.

children.³⁶ Servants therefore faced contradictory directives—to watch and not to see, to listen and not to hear, to reveal and to keep secrets.

**“that we might see what they further did”³⁷
Servants as Spies**

The extent to which servants were able to observe the activities of the household depended in part on how much their masters and mistresses trusted them and considered them part of the family. Not all servants had the same access to their masters’ and mistresses’ lives. Lidea Chapin, who lived with minister Peter Thacher and his wife, was included in family fasts, visited neighbors with Mrs. Thacher, and even sat with her master while he heard parishioners’ confessions. In contrast, the Thachers’ Indian slave, Margaret or Peg, was only mentioned in his diary when she was ill or needed shoes and their African slave Ebed was primarily relegated to the fields with other man servants or alone. Of course, Lidea was also paid an annual wage, consulted about whether she wanted to continue her service with the Thachers, and allowed to go to Boston almost every Sabbath after the family moved to Milton. Peg and Ebed, the Thachers’ slaves, were given none of these privileges or courtesies.³⁸ English servant women and girls might have been treated as kin, but Indians and Africans seem, at least in the Thacher household, to have been considered differently. Still, all servants had information that came from proximity to their masters and mistresses and from their intimate labor in and around the household.

Masters and mistresses had good reason to fear what servants might say about what they saw and heard in the household. Some servants were able to observe extremely scandalous

³⁶ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 44, 47.

³⁷ Elizabeth Waters testimony, Massachusetts State Archives Collection, vol. 8, Depositions 1662–1766, 8.

³⁸ Young Peg might have been more prominent in a journal written by Thacher’s wife. Peter Thacher diary typescript, 1:105, 158, 177, 219–20, 223, 247, 254; 2:7–8, 13, 32.

behavior in their households and occasionally made efforts to investigate. Elizabeth Waters, servant to Elizabeth and Nicholas Manning, testified that her mistress had gone from the house and “lodged at another place” after the couple quarreled. The night after her mistress left, Waters got out of bed and passed by her master’s chamber from which she heard the quiet voices of her master and a woman. She believed the woman to be Anstis Manning, her master’s sister, and she went back to her chamber and told her fellow servants Ann Killegrew and Grace Stiver that “Mrs. Anstis was in bed with her brother.” They decided to get up early the next morning and “see if we should find them in bed together.” In the morning they indeed saw their master in bed with his sister and as the servants went into the kitchen they “left the door far open, that we might see what they further did.” They saw Anstis get out of bed wearing only her under-petticoat, “which we conceived she had then slipped on,” and then saw their master get out of bed with no clothes on. Elizabeth also testified that “she hath several times since seen her master aforesaid in bed under the bed clothes” with Anstis and with another of his sisters, Margaret Manning. Killegrew and Stiver also said that they had seen Nicholas Manning and his sisters in bed together several times since the night in question. They had not only seen the siblings in bed together but had also seen suspicious evidence while diligently attending to their labor. In the morning, Elizabeth Waters said, her fellow servant Ann Killegrew “called her to look on the bed when she made it” and they saw a red stain on it. Ann Killegrew and Grace Stiver confirmed that Ann had called Grace and Elizabeth into the room “to see what a condition the bed was in,” and they all saw a red stain.³⁹

³⁹ Elizabeth Waters testimony, Ann Killegrew and Grace Stiver testimony, both in Massachusetts State Archives Collection, vol. 8, Depositions 1662–1766, 8–9.

The servants' accusations were made even more believable by Nicholas Manning's reputation for being inappropriate with them and with his daughters-in-law. Servant Ann Killegrew said that her master had "several times tempted her to lie with him" and promised that she would not get pregnant. Elizabeth Waters said that her master had come into her chamber and "put his hand under [her] coat and kissed her and attempted to throw her on the bed" but stopped when she cried out. Nicholas Manning's two daughters-in-law, Elizabeth Priest and Bethia Allen, both testified that he had been "uncivil" toward them when they lived in the house and that they were "afraid to be alone with him in the house, or with him elsewhere."⁴⁰ The secret was revealed by testimonies before the court and further publicized by the punishments given to Nicholas's sisters. Anstis and Margaret were sentenced to be imprisoned overnight, then whipped "upon the naked body" and then on the next lecture day to "stand or sit upon a high stool during the whole time of the exercise in the open middle alley of the meetinghouse, with a paper upon each of their heads, with their crime written in capital letters." They were able to pay a fine in lieu of the whipping. Nicholas, however, had disappeared and escaped punishment.⁴¹

"seeing her so much wronged"⁴²
Mistreatment of Servants

Nicholas Manning's attempted assaults on his servant maids highlights the ways that service created physical vulnerability. Female servants were in special danger because of the threat of sexual assault but they were also subject to other forms of physical violence and

⁴⁰ Ann Killegrew and Grace Stiver testimony, Elizabeth Waters testimony, and Elizabeth Priest and Bethia Allen testimony, all in Massachusetts State Archives Collection, vol. 8, Depositions 1662–1766, 8–9.

⁴¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:87–88.

⁴² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:224.

mistreatment. The presence of servants in a household had the potential to influence masters' and mistresses' reputations, not just through servants spreading gossip but also when neighbors and friends heard rumors or saw evidence that servants were being mistreated. Servants' ability to protect themselves hinged on their ability to bring mistreatment to the attention of others and to be believed by other members of the community. When these cases came to court, they often came down to a contest between the reputation of the servant and that of the master. It was clear from testimony offered in court that both masters and servants were keenly watched in their behavior toward each other and elsewhere in the community and that neighbors took special notice of how masters cared for servants in their households. The people of Massachusetts Bay took this responsibility seriously and numerous masters found themselves in court because their neighbors did not believe they were providing adequate food and clothing to their servants.⁴³ Oversight of servants was important, but so too was oversight of masters who failed to provide for their servants or who abused their authority.

In November 1681 the Essex County court received a petition from a maid servant, Joan Sullivan, who said that her master Thomas Maule and his wife had beaten her.⁴⁴ The servant described herself as a “poor Irish servant woman” who had been “brought from another country and here destitute of any friend to keep me in this my misery.” She claimed that her master “hath many times unreasonably beat me” and the violence made her fear for her life. Her story

⁴³ Cotton Mather's advice manual gave explicit instructions that servants should be well fed and clothed, even as he warned servants not to expect provisions that were too good for them. Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 13, 35–36. Hugh Laskin and his wife were fined for just such a failing in 1644. One man said that he heard their servant's diet was only “coarse bread and whey,” another said that the servant came to his house and told them “he had eaten nothing that day,” and a third man said that he heard from his wife that the servant had a poor diet and so he asked another man who told him that he was in the process of dealing with Laskin about the issue. *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:69.

⁴⁴ Her name is variously spelled Suiflan, Suiflan, Shulavan, and Sulland in the records. I have standardized the spelling to Sullivan to make it more legible to modern readers.

was harrowing. She said that Maule had “sometimes struck me at least 30 or 40 blows at a time” and that sometimes after the beatings she “spit blood for a fortnight’s time.”⁴⁵ Joan finally went to the local magistrate, Bartholomew Gedney, to make a formal complaint and in the investigation that followed the court also heard from seven women and six men who claimed to have knowledge of the Maules’ household and of Joan’s treatment and behavior there. This case pitted the reputation of an Irish servant maid suspected of Catholicism against that of a man who was soon to become a notorious Quaker and who had recently stirred up trouble with his neighbors during the construction of a new house when he was accused of violating his property’s boundary lines. Maule had been actively associated with the Quakers in Essex County at least since 1677 and had previously been whipped for working on the Sabbath but he was also a prosperous businessman and artisan, and he was entrusted to serve in several local offices in the years to come.⁴⁶

Joan’s claims of abuse were supported by neighbors who had witnessed the beatings or seen the aftermath. They also expanded the complaints; Joan had only complained of mistreatment by Thomas Maule, but witnesses had also seen her mistress Naomi Maule behave violently toward her. John Flint overheard “a great cry in the house” while he was in Maule’s shop and he looked into the house to see Naomi Maule “beating and thumping her Irish servant maid on the head in a very violent manner and also kicking her.” Naomi sent Joan out of the house while threatening her with further beating from Thomas Maule, but then told Flint that Joan was exaggerating by “roaring out in the street” and that she had “only struck her a light touch on the ear,” perhaps not realizing that Flint had seen otherwise. Flint’s son was also a

⁴⁵ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:222–23.

⁴⁶ Matt Bushnell Jones, “Thomas Maule, the Salem Quaker, and Free Speech in Massachusetts Bay, with Bibliographical Notes,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 72 (1936): 3–10.

servant in the Maule household. The younger Flint confirmed his father's story and also said that "he had seen his master beat Joan unreasonably with a maunatee [horse whip] at least thirty or forty stripes." Hannah Sibley said that she saw Joan when she left Gedney's after making her complaint and "her face was bloody and swollen about as large as a child's fist." She also had a large wound on her face "which she said her master did with his horse whip." Frances Croade, Maule's adjoining neighbor who had complained about his house encroaching over their property line, said that Joan had often told her she "was afraid for her life" and "one time she came into the street with a big hole in her face where her master had beaten her." Sarah Cole said that "the shoulders of the Irish maid were all black and blue" and Joan told her that "it was a great deal worse down lower on her body."⁴⁷

Joan told others about the abuse and tried to get them to help her, perhaps taking advantage of the animosity between her master and the Croade household. Joan told Frances Croade that if she "did not complain to authority when asked by Joan" then Frances would be responsible for her death. Croade accompanied Joan to make a complaint to Mr. Gedney but "Maule still continues to beat and kick her." Croade also spoke with Maule about the abuse but he only said that he "locked the door for fear thou shouldest have come in to disturb me." Frances Croade was not the only neighbor who felt a responsibility to report Joan's abuse. Lucretia Derby said that she would have gone to the magistrate but "her present condition would not permit her."⁴⁸ Despite Joan's foreignness, women in the neighborhood seem to have felt a responsibility to intervene in the abuse, particularly against one who was known to be troublesome. Their willingness to help Joan may have stemmed from their dislike of the Maules.

⁴⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:223–25.

⁴⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:223–25.

Frances Croade said that Maule was “known to be a great liar and a contentious person amongst his neighbors reviling and backbiting of them.” She made clear that she was not supporting Joan’s complaint out of “spite or revenge,” however, but out of “conscience and pity to a poor creature so abused.” Lucretia Derby also told the court that Maule was “a very disturbing person among his neighbors” and that he wrote many libels that he spread around the neighborhood. Derby too felt pity toward Joan, “a stranger and fellow creature, seeing her so much wronged.”⁴⁹ Neighbors were more apt to believe Joan’s story because of what they already knew, believed, or had heard about the Maule household.

Joan harnessed the Maules’s reputation in her statement to the court, portraying them as disorderly and ungodly while also indicating her own piety and desire for good discipline. Maule was already suspect because of his repeated criticisms of the puritan authorities and his involvement with the Quakers. Joan told the court that she had been forced to labor on the Sabbath “which hath been a great grief and trouble to me” and asked to be released from her obligation to the Maules and “put to some other [family] where she may be more Christian-like dealt withal.” She said that she had been “compelled to knit and sew” when she came home from the meeting, and Maule had made her and another servant “fetch water to wash and to brew on Sabbath days.” He also made her “water his garden and lay his grass plot on the last fast day.” Jonathan Flint, the other servant in the house, confirmed Joan’s allegations. Neighbors also reported that the Maules also labored on the Sabbath in full view of others. Naomi worked in her garden and sewed at her door, and Thomas Maule balanced his books and went around the neighborhood sharing libels.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:224–25.

⁵⁰ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:224–25.

Others spoke in support of the Maules. Neighbors Priscilla Hunn and Elizabeth Deene both said that they “had never seen them abuse their servants.”⁵¹ Hunn said that they were always given ample “bread, butter, cheese, milk, beef, pork, and other good things,” and Abraham Briggs agreed that the Maules’ servants had “very good victuals.” Those who supported the Maules were critical of Joan’s character and labor. Hunn said that the testimony against the Maules was based on “prejudice and malice” and that Joan provoked them by “inventing lies and repeating what her master and mistress said in their family.” Hunn also said that Joan had once come to her in tears because she thought that Maule was going to sell her away to Lynn and she did not want to go. Joan not only had ulterior motives for reporting abuse, according to these witnesses, but was also a religious enemy. Sarah Linsey said that Joan told her “she was resolved to stay out her time with her master and mistress and then go home to her own country again where she might go to mass.” Linsey did not simply claim that Joan failed to attend meeting but also invoked the specter of Catholicism inherent in her Irishness. Perhaps she was not just Catholic, some suggested, but also a thief. The constable, Joseph Horne, said that Gedney had given him a warrant to bring Joan before him because Maule complained that she stole money from him. Horne said that Joan first said the money in her possession was brought from “her own country,” but he did not believe this because it was “New England money.” She then said that Elizabeth Deene gave her the money but Deene denied it, and finally Joan admitted that she “found the money in Maule’s yard.”⁵² The cumulative story told by these neighbors was that Joan was treated well in the Maules’ household but her complaints were untrustworthy because she was a known liar, thief, and Catholic. These witnesses were not

⁵¹ Her name in the Essex County records is given as Prosilah Hoon.

⁵² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:225–26.

entirely blameless in their own reputations, however. Priscilla Hunn's late husband, Nathaniel, had been repeatedly punished for disorderly behavior including breach of peace and abusing the constable, and the couple had been convicted of fornication before their marriage.⁵³

Thomas Maule tried to undermine his servants' statements by calling their character into question in ways that would have been believable to others who knew the dangers of servants in their midst. He said that Jonathan Flint had stolen from him and that Joan was lazy and obstinate. When he first bought her "she could not speak one word of English" but what he could understand of her Irish showed "bad carriage in language." He said that they had provided well for her but now that she understood English she took "evil counsel" and "we could not get her to do any more or less than as she pleased to do it according to her own way and time." She also called them names such as rogue, jade, and devil.⁵⁴ The case against the Maules was dismissed, indicating that the court was more convinced by the testimony against Joan than by the evidence presented by her supporters. While it is possible that Joan was lying or exaggerating, it is also quite possible that an Irish (and suspected Catholic) woman without a protective kin network was especially vulnerable both to ill treatment and to being disbelieved, even more than a Quaker man and his unruly family.⁵⁵ Thomas Maule was fined, however, for breach of the Sabbath, so at least part of the accusations against him were considered reliable.

Unsurprisingly, servants who reported untoward behavior by their masters often found their own reputations on trial and a servant's bad reputation could undermine complaints about mistreatment. When Sarah Taylor accused Goodwife Allin of beating her, she instead found herself charged by William Allin for "going from his service in a disorderly way and for

⁵³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:410; 5:64, 120; 7:233–34.

⁵⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:225.

⁵⁵ On servants without kinship networks, see Morris, *Under Household Government*, 8.

accusing his wife of cruelly beating her.” Her accusation of physical abuse became evidence against her because “she was found guilty of many contrary tales, that she had met with evil counselors which was the main trouble.” Like Joan Sullivan, Sarah Taylor was thought to have been susceptible to the suggestions and evil influence of others and despite the expectation that masters would oversee their servants’ lives, it was the servants themselves who were blamed when they fell under the influence of bad company.⁵⁶

The danger of not being believed and having accusations of abuse rebound on them could be worth the risk when mistreatment was severe. Mistreatment of servants was taken seriously and gossip about household violence could provide the only protection servants might have against cruelty from their masters and mistresses. Henry and Jane Stacy brought their daughter Martha to an Essex County commissioner and showed him evidence of the beatings she endured in the house where she was a servant. The parents testified that they had put Martha into service at the home of Joseph Cocker in Newberry and they went to find her “upon information of her bad usage there.” She had been beaten but they did not have the means to pursue a lawsuit against Martha’s master so they asked the commissioner to undertake an investigation on their behalf. The commissioner testified that the girl was “very feeble, very much bruised, black and blue in her face and arms and seemed very much besotted as if she had lost her understanding and speech” but could not tell them how she came by her injuries. William Beale said that he was “moved with compassion at the sight of such an object of pity” and went to collect statements in Newberry “at the request of spectators.” Neighbors knew about the abuse because they had seen it while passing by the house or by being present during the beatings and several had confronted the Cockers about Martha’s treatment, telling them to “return her to her parents

⁵⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 6:340.

rather than abuse her.”⁵⁷ Neighbors’ informal efforts had failed but the gossip that reached Martha’s parents allowed them to advocate for her, and once they did so, those with knowledge of her treatment came forward to tell what they had seen and heard.⁵⁸

Any case in which the word of a servant was weighed against her employers led courts to consider reputations. Extensive testimony in cases concerning servant Hannah Downing show how the reputation of a servant could be weighed against that of her master’s family, showing the extent to which the community had dealings with all of them and had formed opinions based on their own experiences and what they heard from others. The court heard a complaint from Hannah Downing against Nathaniel, Samuel, and Thomas Leonard, the sons of her master and mistress, Henry and Mary Leonard, for “several misdemeanors and lascivious carriages.” She said that they had “annoyed her when she was in bed, kicked her and struck her several times until she thought they would kill her.” She told their parents about this treatment and they did nothing, so she took her complaints to the authorities out of fear for her life.⁵⁹

Hannah’s father and two women came to Hannah’s defense. Macam Downing told the court that he had come to the Leonard house to visit his daughter Hannah while her mistress and master were away. That night he heard Samuel in her room and after sending him out, Macam slept in the room with his daughter to prevent Samuel from returning. His story echoed that of Elizabeth Looke, who said that she shared a bed with Hannah when she lived with the Leonards and once Thomas Leonard “came to the bedside” and Hannah cried out to their master, who said

⁵⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 7:421–22.

⁵⁸ On the informal pressure neighbors could bring to bear on masters who abused their servants, see Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 149.

⁵⁹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:351.

that he did not believe her and that it was “David Inden or somebody else” rather than his son. Sarah Bates saw the Leonards “abuse said Hannah and pull off her head-cloth.”⁶⁰

This testimony is scant compared to the evidence of abuse in the case of Joan Sullivan and as with Joan Sullivan’s complaint about her master and mistress, Hannah’s character was scrutinized before the court. Samuel Leonard said that Hannah’s complaint was “made out of malice and not conscience.” He said that she was making a “false complaint” to “save herself” and deflect attention from her own bad behavior. Samuel Leonard said that Hannah had “been a person of very scandalous carriage” and he had often warned her against nightwalking. Others agreed that Hannah was badly behaved. John Hounkin reported that when Hannah lived at the Leonard house she “went abroad at unseasonable times in the night and did not come home until it was almost day,” and “at sundry times she used to sit up all night with fellows who came to the house.” John Tarbell and James Cady reported seeing “improper carriages” between Hannah and John Everett at a local house and Thomas and Henry Leonard suggested that she had behaved inappropriately with Benjamin Bigsby.⁶¹

The crucial evidence in Hannah’s case seems to have concerned the behavior and reputations of the Leonards. Some reported that they lacked modesty. John Gould had seen Samuel and Nathaniel Leonard swimming naked at the dam and behaving “indecently” toward a woman who came there. Robert Andrews said that he was at the pond near the iron works in Rowley Village and saw the Leonard sons “came out of the water naked and ran races.” Joseph Bixby said that he had been at the Leonard house early one morning and seen Mary Leonard getting dressed with “several men in the room.” He had also seen her at the pond while the men

⁶⁰ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:352.

⁶¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:351–55.

were “swimming and washing themselves” and the more modest men were “forced to creep up into the bushes and others put their shirts on in the water” so that she did not see them naked. Others were more blunt in their insinuations that Mary Leonard was promiscuous and ungoverned. Samuel Symons said that he was at the Leonard house and saw Mary Leonard, Henry Leonard, and Doctor Taylor go with a “little girl” toward the “long plain.” A half-hour later Symons went the same way toward the village and saw Mr. Leonard and the girl heading home but there was no sign of Taylor and Mary Leonard despite the “plain being easily seen all over.” Robert Andrews also reported that he had seen Doctor Taylor and Mary Leonard together at the Rowley Village pond. The insinuation that Mary Leonard was having a sexual affair with Taylor was evidently widespread. John How countered the rumors by saying that Mary told him she went with Taylor into the woods to look for medicinal plants, and that when Taylor stayed in their house he slept in the parlor.⁶² How’s testimony could not overcome the Leonards’ already notorious reputation for misbehavior.⁶³

Others suggested that the Leonards behaved badly toward other women and girls. Elizabeth Symons said that Samuel Leonard came to her house asking for beer and when she went to draw some from the cellar he followed her and tried to kiss her. She told him “there is maids enough for you to kiss and not to come to kiss married women” and he “struck her on the small of her back.” Hannah Peabody and Faith Black also told the court that Samuel behaved indecently toward them on separate occasions when he found them alone. Grace Andraw said that her daughter and another girl were sharing a bed at her house one night and Thomas Leonard came and “annoyed them all night, so that they could not sleep.” It was not only the Leonards’

⁶² *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:352–53.

⁶³ Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*, 266–67.

actions but also their words that were ungoverned. Faith Black reported that Nathaniel Leonard had referred to a neighbor as an “old devil” and when she reproved him, “he said he would not care if he were in hell a fortnight, and he did not care if the devil plucked the soul out of him, and a pox take him, he did not care.” Again, efforts at informal watchfulness and correction had failed. Joseph Bixby reported that the Leonards often “used very bad words, as devil and damn ye and many words which I have been ashamed to hear,” and Daniel Bixby said that he heard Mary Leonard “use bad language and sing indecent songs.”⁶⁴

Testimony against the Leonards was evidently persuasive. Nathaniel and Samuel Leonard sued Hannah for defamation because of her complaints, arguing that she made them in retaliation for being forced to work, but the cases were withdrawn and Nathaniel, Samuel, and Thomas were sentenced to be whipped or fined for “several misdemeanors and lascivious carriages.” Their mother Mary Leonard was admonished for “several uncivil carriages.”⁶⁵ Hannah’s claims were proved, but only after her father and seventeen members of the neighborhood aired the good and bad reputations of Hannah and the Leonard family before the court and community. The Leonards had found themselves in court numerous times for debts, defamation, and disorder, but their behavior toward Hannah did not enter the public record until she brought her case.⁶⁶ When Hannah made her complaint, gossip in the neighborhood had helped her convince the court that she was being mistreated and her case led to the Leonards being punished for behavior neighbors had long observed but not reported. In other words, gossip became news.

⁶⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:353–55.

⁶⁵ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:326, 355.

⁶⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:174, 198–99; 2:98; 5:31, 113, 130, 173.

“the eye of a master is a great motive”⁶⁷
Surveillance and Moral Education

Service was meant to provide young adults with the structure, surveillance, and religious training that they might not have received in their family of origin, although the reality of the experience did not always bear this out.⁶⁸ Servants were supposed to be under constant surveillance, living and working under the watchful eye of masters, family members, fellow servants, and neighbors who might observe them.⁶⁹ Masters and mistresses were well aware that they had a responsibility to keep watch over their servants. Matthew Boynton reminded John Winthrop Jr. that “servants should have eyes over them especially when they are at so far a distance from their master,” and hoped that when he was not himself present he would “be pleased to entreat some friends of yours...that they will both advise them and examine them and direct them.”⁷⁰

The mechanism through which service would impart moral education was integration of the servant into the family. From the beginning, the Massachusetts Bay Company made provision for servants to live under family government. Before the Winthrop fleet left Gravesend, they assigned the company’s servants to families and ordered that the settlers “take special care, in settling these families, that the chief in the family (at least some of them) be grounded in religion” and to ensure that “a watchful eye held over all in each family by one or more in each family...that so disorders may be prevented, and ill weeds nipt before they take too

⁶⁷ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 630, 682.

⁶⁸ On service as social regulation, see Towner, “Good Master Well Served,” 90–92; Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 102–5; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 132; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:397.

⁶⁹ Towner, “Good Master Well Served,” 2.

⁷⁰ *Winthrop Papers*, 3:247.

great a head.”⁷¹ This plan does not seem to have been implemented, but servants were taken into households and were, like children, dependent members of the household and theoretically subject to disciplinary oversight, constant surveillance, and regulation of their leisure activities.⁷² M. Michelle Jarrett Morris found that the distinction between servants and children was most easily seen in responses to wayward behavior. While children’s mistakes were “met time and again with a mixture of reproof and compassion,” she argued, servants were “expendable when their morals compromised a family’s integrity.”⁷³ This distinction does not adequately convey the nuances and idiosyncrasies of master-servant relationships, however. A good example can be found in Peter Thacher’s diary, in which he recorded that he beat his Indian slave girl with “a good walnut stick” until she “promise never to do so any more” for inadequately supervising his daughter, while English servant Lidea was only given a heart-to-heart talk when she did not demonstrate sufficient deference to him and his wife. Servants’ behavior was to be closely monitored and regulated to ensure that they would not harm the family or the master’s reputation but some were treated more like kin than others. Service extended family government by including others’ children in the household but this did not eliminate the vulnerability that might result from a lack of local kin.⁷⁴ Service was thus a way to perpetuate moral and religious values, both by inculcating those values in masterless people who might otherwise have been wayward and by giving godly youth preferential treatment.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:397.

⁷² Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*; Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 39; Towner, “Good Master Well Served,” 23. On the relationship between children and servants in theories of household governance, see Morris, *Under Household Government*, 209–12.

⁷³ Morris, *Under Household Government*, 210; Peter Thacher diary typescript, 1: 24, 34, 50.

⁷⁴ Morris, *Under Household Government*, 8.

⁷⁵ Towner, “Fondness for Freedom,” 203–4.

Keeping servants in line was made easier by employing servants who would not push against these constraints. Cotton Mather warned masters to choose their servants wisely, if possible, to avoid any that “shall be noted for any visible and notorious ungodliness” and to seek “a good report, of them.”⁷⁶ Those seeking servants were “generally careful,” Cotton Mather wrote elsewhere, to “bring over none but godly servants in their own families” to prevent any ill effects from the influence of ungodly people living under their roofs.⁷⁷ Once engaged, servants should be educated, taught to read, and catechized, and their behavior, company, and speech should be monitored. Servants should be allowed time for spiritual pursuits but they should not be allowed too much idle time that would encourage “unfaithfulness.” There was real danger in allowing servants to have unsupervised time or in permitting them to behave in ungodly ways. It was the master’s and mistress’s duty to observe servants’ behavior as part of their moral education, to ensure they performed their duties and refrained from bad behavior. Gouge noted that “the eye of a master is a great motive to make a servant diligent and faithful: for thus he knoweth that both his diligence, and also his negligence shall be seen, and accordingly dealt withal.”⁷⁸ In the case of household domestic labor, the observing eye would more often have belonged to a mistress than a master.

Female servants’ vulnerability to gossip began before they were even placed in a household. The processes by which female domestic servants were hired show that reputation and personal references were key to securing placement. Those seeking servants would ask their

⁷⁶ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 9. African and Indian servants were purchased rather than bound by agreement, but even then their reputations were important in determining the price and whether or not they were kept. See, for example, Peter Thacher’s negotiations when purchasing Ebed. Peter Thacher diary typescript, 2:26–27.

⁷⁷ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 240.

⁷⁸ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 630, 682.

friends and kin to look out for an available hand, and servants seeking employment would ask former masters or mistresses to inquire on their behalf.⁷⁹ Both men and women exchanged letters asking for help finding servants or suggesting the placement of servants known to them, but women were responsible for securing household labor and their letters convey a particular desperation about their maid servants and fluctuations in the availability of household labor. When Mary Dudley lost her maid servant, she wrote to Margaret Winthrop multiple times over several months asking for help in finding a skilled dairy maid to replace her, “one that hath been used to all kind of work, and must refuse none.”⁸⁰ Margaret herself was in need of a maid two years later and Lucy Downing offered to her use one of her maids until she could find a permanent servant since, as Downing wrote, she was “overmaided,” but in 1640 Downing wrote to Winthrop asking for help in finding a dairy and kitchen maid for her own household.⁸¹

It was vital for masters and mistresses to gather and share information about potential members of their households; they knew that the presence of servants made them vulnerable to misdeeds and disloyalty. Masters sometimes had to be less discerning than they would have liked, however, since maids could be hard to find.⁸² Cotton Mather remarked in his diary that he was “exercised in my family, with the want of good servants,” and Samuel Sewall mentioned that he was in need of a house maid but it was “hard to find a good one.”⁸³ Many households tried to reform troublesome servants rather than replace them, often to no avail. Mary Dudley

⁷⁹ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 132.

⁸⁰ *Winthrop Papers*, 3:223, 242, 257. On the significance of dairying in New England, see Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 77.

⁸¹ *Winthrop Papers, 1638–1644*, vol. 4 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1944), 63, 64, 273.

⁸² The difficulty in obtaining servants are frequently mentioned in primary sources, particularly from mid-century when the English Civil Wars limited migration. See, for example, Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 573–74; Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:490, 553; Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:34.

⁸³ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:553; Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:34.

wrote Margaret Winthrop that her maid caused “great affliction” with her “insolent” and “unsufferable” behavior, including “reviling speeches, and filthy language she hath used towards me,” and resisted all efforts that Mary and her husband put forth to reform her.⁸⁴ When servant Grace Stout was brought to the Essex County court on accusations of stealing, testimonies revealed that she had been “a notorious thief” and she had stolen from multiple households in which she lived.⁸⁵ Despite these repeated transgressions, and the ways that her thieving was facilitated by her position in these households, she continued to secure placement as a servant. This suggests that either her new employers did not seek character references, the information was not shared, or that households were so desperate for labor that they hoped she would reform under their watchful eyes.

Most servants were probably dutiful or at least managed to better conceal their transgressions. There were likely many more servants than would appear from court and church records because most who were in service stayed out of trouble, and many others who were mentioned in the extant documents may have been servants but were not named as such. Whether or not all households had their own servants, certainly they would have been a common enough sight in neighborhood homes and the local streetscape and some individuals left significant marks in the records. Through tracing these lives we can arrive at some approximation of the lives countless others must have led. Even those who were not rebellious were part of a suspect class. While Towner argues that servitude was primarily the province of the poor, others have shown that families from up and down the social scale sent their children

⁸⁴ *Winthrop Papers*, 3:221.

⁸⁵ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 8:279–82.

into other households.⁸⁶ They were overwhelmingly young, living away from their parents, and although many lived in godly households they seem to not have been subject to the same kind of rigorous religious oversight that the family's children might have been.

Despite lofty goals to make service in New England a moral good, by the end of the century servants had become associated poverty and moral failings, and with “knavery and villainy.” According to Cotton Mather, a man who was particularly sensitive to any threats to the reputations of godly men and women, servants had brought “discredit upon the very names, which were once innocently and agreeably used, for all that rank of people.” Mather praised dutiful servants in his diary, and he pleaded with a hypothetical servant who might read his pamphlet to reform their behavior in order to bring glory to God “instead of bringing a blemish upon your own poor names.”⁸⁷ Service indentures often contained agreements about the servant's behavior that aligned with these fears about disorder—that the servant would not frequent taverns, “keep bad company,” or walk out at night without permission—but these efforts to curtail servants' socializing were difficult to maintain.

“coming unseasonably on Lord's day and in nights”⁸⁸ Servants' Social Lives

In practical terms there were many circumstances under which servants had to be trusted to behave appropriately when not being watched—while out in the fields, when left alone in the home, or when traveling to conduct their master's or mistress's business. Servants often escaped the watchful eyes of the community on Sundays while others attended services at the

⁸⁶ Towner, “Good Master Well Served,” 75, 84; Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 105; Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 28; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 132.

⁸⁷ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 31.

⁸⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:13.

meetinghouse, or by staying up after the rest of the household had gone to bed and socializing either in the house or out of doors.⁸⁹ Even when the mechanisms of watchfulness were used, servants could avoid detection and punishment, such as when a couple was returning home after staying out in the night drinking, smoking, and eating an apple tart. They were confronted by the night watch but made excuses that were deemed credible and avoided punishment. Another servant woman who had been with them was caught in the morning wearing only her petticoat and lied to her mistress by saying she was just getting dressed when in fact she had undressed in the kitchen only a few minutes before.⁹⁰ These servants tried to evade questions from those who were meant to discipline them by lying about the clandestine gathering.

Servants' characters were frequently undermined by reports that they were prone to "nightwalking" and other ways of avoiding surveillance, such as staying up all night by the fire or being alone with other servants in the kitchen or cellar.⁹¹ Servants were also considered vulnerable to corruption and not only was their behavior policed, but others were also disciplined for permitting servants to transgress. Ordinary keepers in particular were fined for entertaining servants on Sundays and for providing them with drink. Both the servants and the person entertaining them were at fault.⁹² Servants were corruptible, like children, if not well-governed, and well-behaved servants were only possible when the entire community refrained from tempting them into bad behavior. Watchfulness was not pervasive enough to prevent servants from pursuing social lives apart from their households, but these pursuits could also leave them

⁸⁹ On youth culture in early New England, see Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, chap. 5; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 29–33.

⁹⁰ Case of Richard Brown, 16 September 1684, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 27, #2248.

⁹¹ For examples see *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 5:353; 7:43–44; 8:315.

⁹² *Suffolk County Court Records, Part 1*, 29:222, 336.

vulnerable. Occupying a place inside households but only as temporary family members who may have lacked godly upbringing, they were considered susceptible to the influences of bad company and easily led astray by those who might corrupt them for their own ends.

Masters who were inattentive to female servants' social lives could leave them vulnerable to manipulation by men who pretended to court them. Servant girls and women, like daughters, were supposed to have their masters' consent before courting or accepting offers of marriage but many seem not to have sought that permission and went to lengths to keep their liaisons hidden. Housemaids evaded detection by meeting their suitors in the house after the family had gone to bed, retreating to cellars or venturing out of doors to meet up with others who sought to escape observation in the dark hours after the evening bell. A complaint was brought against Thomas Sams for speaking to a maid servant "without her master's or mistress' consent" and for "coming unseasonably on Lord's day and in nights, for being contracted without consent of his master or mistress."⁹³ Since marriage was often the only way to leave service, these young women's eagerness to find marriage partners may have made them less careful than they ought to have been and their efforts to pursue relationships in secret made them vulnerable.⁹⁴ In 1701, a man who variously called himself Thomas Stanbury, William Man, Jarvis, and Elias Brinton was accused of stealing household goods from John Campbell's house after courting Campbell's spinster servant, Elizabeth Corbison, three years before. Corbison told the court the man had visited her often at two different houses where she served, and they met outside near the townhouse and in the yard. He eventually called on her at her master's house one night at ten o'clock. Her fellow servant let him in and the three stayed in the kitchen cellar until midnight,

⁹³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:13.

⁹⁴ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 147.

when the other servant went to bed and left Elizabeth and her suitor alone. She went to fetch him a pipe at his request and when she returned to the kitchen he was gone and so were a silver tankard and two silver spoons.⁹⁵

Other servant girls found themselves pregnant and unmarried when men who courted them reneged on promises to wed. Mary Reeves, a servant to Mr. Alsock, found herself pregnant by Ezekiel Gardiner after she claimed he had implied that he would marry her. Testimony about their relationship showed the extent to which they were able to evade observation by her master and mistress, though not by other servants. Reeves and Gardiner were observed together in her master's house—in the hall chamber, the kitchen, and the parlor—and in the garden by her fellow servant girl. Another male servant also remembered Reeves and Gardiner disappearing to the garden together. John Harker said that he had gone to the Alsock house with Gardiner before the last husking and that night was when Gardiner “laid with her in the kitchen.” Harker stayed for the husking and spent the night at the Alsock house and in the morning Reeves told him “they had not been in bed all night.”⁹⁶ This seasonal event gave them an opportunity to be together but the gathering meant they could not evade watchful eyes.

Reeves's impression that Gardiner would marry her showed the importance of having witnesses to courting. Reeves had told John Chandler that Gardiner had “in part promised her” but no one could corroborate it. When Chandler saw Ezekiel a day or two later and asked him about Reeves, the lack of witnesses meant he was able to “den[y] that he had ever spoken a word to her about any such thing.” Reeves did not seem entirely surprised and remembered that “she

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Corbison deposition, Francis Thresher deposition, and Moses Preverance deposition, all in Massachusetts State Archives Collection, vol. 8, Depositions 1662–1766, 108–12.

⁹⁶ Ezekiel Gardiner testimony, Benjamin Brisco deposition, Elizabeth Cheney deposition, John Huntley testimony, Elizabeth Chandler testimony, Judith Thurstone testimony, Edward Read testimony, John Hill deposition, John Harker testimony, John Chandler testimony, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #600.

was afraid he would deceive her because she could not prove it.” She then asked Chandler to summon Ezekiel to her house so that she could speak to him with a witness. Informing others about a courtship could provide other kinds of protection by giving access to gossip about a suitor. When Mary Reeves told Elizabeth Chandler about her relationship with Gardiner, Elizabeth warned her to be careful. This warning was probably based on numerous rumors that had spread around the neighborhood about Gardiner’s exploits with other women. He was said to have “wooded” two women in addition to Reeves and there were reports he had attempted to assault others, including another servant and a married woman. When confronted, he had “boasted that he had made a fool of twenty maids.” Some also reported that Gardiner “did usually sing very bawdy songs in his shop...such as was not meet for any Christian or chaste ears to hear.”⁹⁷ Servants’ desires for unsupervised social lives created vulnerability since evading masters’ and mistresses’ attention meant also being outside their protection. Their exposure to potential harm was only partly alleviated by tapping into information networks maintained by neighbors and fellow servants, but this also put them at risk of detection that could jeopardize their reputations and placements.⁹⁸

**“nothing suspected before that I hear of”⁹⁹
Fornication**

Servant women and girls who did not carefully guard against opportunistic men or who entered into consensual sexual relationships before marriage could be accused of fornication,

⁹⁷ Ezekiel Gardiner testimony, Benjamin Brisco deposition, Elizabeth Cheney deposition, John Huntley testimony, Elizabeth Chandler testimony, Judith Thurstone testimony, Edward Read testimony, John Hill deposition, John Harker testimony, John Chandler testimony, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #600.

⁹⁸ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 191.

⁹⁹ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:110.

which put them in danger of both losing their positions and being prosecuted in court. Fornication scandals could have catastrophic effects for female servants, who might find themselves cast out of their employment and subject to criminal punishments. Households in which they were employed also suffered damage to their reputations when their servants were found to be insufficiently governed. Fornication cases help unravel the lines of communication and watchfulness because they concern activities that were clandestine and “secret” but had been somehow uncovered—by chance observation or intentional spying, by overhearing or by intentional eavesdropping, suspicions became accusations and through the courts came before the eyes and ears of the community at large. Fornication cases involving servants highlight the way the power functioned in sexual relationships, and servants’ lack of official social power also makes these cases a way to investigate intersecting lines of power and communication and the ways that gossip created means for lower status individuals to influence cultural development. These cases make servants as visible in the spatial and cultural history of early New England as they were at the time.

Some of Massachusetts’s most prominent men collected and shared gossip about servant fornication. John Winthrop noted a rumor that one W.F. had “gotten a wench with child,” and Samuel Sewall remembered confronting Samuel Haugh with accusations that a maid servant had named him as the father of her bastard child.¹⁰⁰ In May 1686, Samuel Sewell recorded in his diary that “Mr. Mather’s Maid” had been “brought to bed of a child.” Despite her position in a prominent household, or perhaps because of it, Sewall noted with seeming surprise that “nothing suspected before that I hear of.” He also recorded that Mather had “turn’d her out of [his]

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, 1:346; *Winthrop Papers, 1498–1628*, vol. 1 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929), 102.

house.”¹⁰¹ Clearly, prominent households were not immune from servant scandals and as with cases of mistreatment, courts were sometimes forced to weigh the reputations of servant maids against those of their more eminent employers and their families.¹⁰² Governor John Endicott’s household was entangled in scandal when his servant Elizabeth Due fell pregnant and accused his son Zerobabell of being the father. She was later sentenced to be whipped for making this accusation, which the court determined was a “pernicious lie,” and for fornication with Cornelius Hulett, who they believed was the true father of the child. Six months later, Elizabeth Due was now Elizabeth Hulett, having married the supposed father of her child, and she was sentenced to be whipped with twenty stripes with a paper pinned to her forehead identifying her as “A SLANDERER OF MR. ZEROBABELL ENDICOTT.”¹⁰³ Endicott released her from her contract and “set her at liberty, having given her her time.” The language sounds like a reward to twenty-first-century ears, but as with Mather’s maid this was more likely a punishment since the Endicotts were absolving themselves of supporting either Elizabeth or her child and leaving her without home or livelihood. Being left without support was a real danger for unmarried mothers, and Hulett was probably saved only by her marriage.

The court’s decision in Elizabeth’s case came despite the testimonies of Dulzebella Bishop and Mary Bishop, who both said that Elizabeth had come to their house “several times...on her mistress’[s] business” and told them about Zerobabell’s “unseemly words and actions when she was at her work of lace making.” Elizabeth told them that when she had gone “to the farm” with Zerobabell his “carriage was such that she told him she would not be his common baud.” In contrast, she said that Cornelius Hulett “had never offered her wrong...in all

¹⁰¹ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:110.

¹⁰² Henigman, *Coming into Communion*, 70.

¹⁰³ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:380.

the time he have been in the house.” They asked why she had not complained to her master about Zerobabell’s attentions and Elizabeth said that she had told Mary Gowen, who responded “I know thy condition, alas, poor wench” and said that Zerobabell had also “insulted” her.¹⁰⁴ Whether or not Zerobabell was the father of Elizabeth’s child, her accusations and the supporting testimony had been damaging enough that a severe public repudiation was necessary to counter them.¹⁰⁵ Servants who were subjected to sexual advances or assaults by their masters or other family members were in a precarious situation, since their status called their motives into question and making accusations could threaten their positions and reputations.

The presumption that servant women would make false accusations made reputation a vital part of their defense when they made accusations of paternity. In November 1669, John Burges was fined for committing fornication with servant Rebecca Outen. Burges had “positively denied” her allegations and said that “she was well known and had accused other men before.”¹⁰⁶ But Rebecca’s master, Zebulon Hill, said that Burges had referred to her as his “sweetheart” when they were both at John Gidney’s house. When Hill went home an hour later, his wife said that she “had been called home by the children who came to tell her that Burges had taken away the maid.”¹⁰⁷ Burges and Rebecca had also been seen together at Hilliard Veren’s house the previous summer when Rebecca had been there washing. Veren testified that “Burges often came there and his children saw them whispering together.” The relationship was also confirmed by Rebecca, who admitted that they had “improper relations.”¹⁰⁸ Burges’s denials,

¹⁰⁴ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 1:361–62.

¹⁰⁵ See also Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 199; Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 121, 433n56.

¹⁰⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:200.

¹⁰⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:200.

¹⁰⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 4:199–200.

and his insinuation that Rebecca Outen was both promiscuous and a liar, were not enough to counter the evidence provided by her master, her mistress, and a neighboring householder.¹⁰⁹

“keep it secret”¹¹⁰

Bastardy and Infanticide

Fornication was most commonly brought to the attention of courts when a woman became pregnant and servants’ pregnancies, actual or suspected, drew attention. Servant pregnancies were exceedingly common; forty percent of women prosecuted in Essex County for having illegitimate children during the seventeenth-century were servants.¹¹¹ John Gifford sued Bartholomew Stretton for “selling him a servant woman with child” and testimonies in the case showed that many people had been paying attention to physical signs that might have pointed to pregnancy. Other passengers on the ship with Joan Nevill when she came to New England remembered that she was sick and had trouble eating, and many of them asked if she was pregnant. Nevill denied it and told the women “they were whores.” Others testified that they heard Stretton say that if she was pregnant he would “send her to Rhode Island.”¹¹² A pregnant servant could bring shame to a household and to its head, introduce disorder to a community, and deprive her master of labor while she was indisposed.¹¹³ Sending a servant away when she was found to be pregnant could be a way of trying to stifle gossip about her condition and also

¹⁰⁹ Outen had a second illegitimate child in 1679. Else K. Hambleton, “The World Fill’d with a Generation of Bastards: Pregnant Brides and Unwed Mothers in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts” (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2000), 53.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Mellows examination, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #605.

¹¹¹ Hambleton, “The World Fill’d with a Generation of Bastards: Pregnant Brides and Unwed Mothers in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” 54. It makes sense that servants would be well-represented in these cases since they had fewer options for marriage if fornication resulted in pregnancy. Laura Gowing, “Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 92.

¹¹² Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 7, #728.

¹¹³ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 147.

absolve the master and mistress of financial and moral responsibility. Women's bodies as much as their words and actions were subject to gossip and inquiry by those who were attuned to their changes.

Servants' pregnancies show how servants' and mistresses' gossip networks intersected and reinforced one another. Childbirth was a female event, but Laura Gowing has noted that for unmarried mothers the women who attended were "not companions, but threats."¹¹⁴ Attention to the signs of pregnancy, or willful ignorance of them, could protect some women while endangering others and forced women to weigh competing pressures to keep or reveal secrets.¹¹⁵ In 1663/4, an enslaved African woman named Zipporah was brought to court for fornication with Jeffero, an enslaved man who belonged to another household, after she gave birth to a bastard child that she buried in secret. She was indicted for murder after an infant's body was found.¹¹⁶ Information about the pregnancy, the birth, and the burial was shared by other servants, slaves, and their mistresses, some of whom were present at the birth. The first indication that Zipporah was pregnant seems to have come from an enslaved woman named Besse, who had told Mrs. Sands about three weeks before the birth that she had noticed Zipporah "looked very big." Mrs. Sands approached Zipporah's mistress, Ann Manning, and told her of Besse's speculation, and Manning then told her mother, Ann Parker. Parker said that she would investigate but later told

¹¹⁴ Gowing, "Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England," 87. See also Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 155–58.

¹¹⁵ Gowing, "Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England," 89–94; Henigman, *Coming into Communion*, 61–65.

¹¹⁶ Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #605. There is disagreement among historians about whether Zipporah was enslaved or free. Morris follows Sanborn in believing that Zipporah was a free woman, while Wendy Warren writes that she was enslaved. It is more likely that she was unfree, particularly because she was threatened with being sold away to the West Indies. Morris, *Under Household Government*, 191; Melinde Lutz Sanborn, "The Case of the Headless Baby: Did Interracial Sex in the Massachusetts Bay Colony Lead to Infanticide and the Earliest Habeas Corpus Petition in America?," *Hofstra Law Review* 38 (2009): 257–58, 262; Warren, *New England Bound*, 168.

Sands that Zipporah was not pregnant and was menstruating, perhaps an attempt by either Zipporah or Sands to cover up the pregnancy. Sands passed this information along to Besse when she inquired about whether Zipporah's mistress had been informed. It is unclear why Besse was so insistent about Zipporah's condition. Perhaps she was attempting to protect Zipporah from the complications that she knew would follow a clandestine birth, but her queries at least suggest that assuming solidarity among African women might be a mistake. Besse was not the only African woman who was curious about Zipporah. Another woman, Mary, said that she heard "her countrywoman" Zipporah was ill in bed and went to see her. On the way she met Ann Manning and said that "she was bold to come and see her countrywoman" and Manning told her that Zipporah was "well on her legs."¹¹⁷ Zipporah seems to have had some small network of "countrywomen," a community of African slaves, but this did not shield her from prying eyes and in fact had encouraged inquiries into her condition. These women either did not have the power or the willingness to protect Zipporah. It was the actions of her mistress and her mistress's network that attempted to protect her by protecting themselves.

When Zipporah went into labor, her mistress did not call on this African community. Parker and Manning called for Sands and the three women attended the birth along with Parker's servant, Elizabeth Mellows, who was in the house to assist but was not in the room during the birth. These women conspired with Zipporah to keep the birth a secret despite the expectation that servants' mistresses would not keep secrets for them and the probability that they would be interrogated by the courts about what they knew and when they knew it if the pregnancy was discovered. Although servants were expected to keep secrets for their households, there was no

¹¹⁷ Besse's examination, Mary's examination, and Mrs. Sands examination, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #605.

provision in contracts or in popular practice that masters would keep their servants' secrets as servants were expected to keep theirs, especially when disorder as serious as illicit pregnancy was involved. In fact, the opposite was true. Keeping servants' confidences was violation of norms that could be used against someone in court, and masters were meant to inquire into their servants' private lives to prevent misdeeds. Cotton Mather wrote that masters had a duty to "be prudently inquisitive into their [servants'] experiences, into their temptations, into their behaviors" and to "reprove every miscarriage that may be discerned in them."¹¹⁸ Keeping secrets for servants could upend this hierarchy and increase the threat of disorder by undermining family government, revealing masters' and mistresses' inability to properly govern their households, and implicating masters and mistresses in their servants' ungoverned behavior. Servants clearly strove to carve out unobserved moments in their lives, but in the cultural imagination secrets were not a privilege enjoyed by dependents who could not be trusted to conduct their lives without observation and correction.¹¹⁹

The women who were involved in Zipporah's labor and the attempt to hide the birth heeded no such warnings. Their efforts to conceal the birth were perhaps motivated by concerns about their own reputations and the financial damages that might result from Zipporah's prosecution. Ann Parker, her mistress's mother, told the court that they had sent for Sands during Zipporah's labor because "she had some thoughts of such a thing before," which meant that they would not be enlarging the circle of people who knew about the illicit pregnancy. Mrs. Sands countered insinuations about concealment by saying that she had tried to get the midwife

¹¹⁸ Mather, *Good Master Well Served*, 15–18.

¹¹⁹ While Edmund Morgan concluded that servants had neither the time nor the "right" to a "private life," Flaherty and Towner have both argued that servants actually had many opportunities for realizing unsanctioned or unsupervised social lives. Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 114–15, 123; Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England*, 62; Towner, "Good Master Well Served," 186–87, 204.

to come but the woman refused to involve herself in the birth. All of the women present during Zipporah's labor testified that the child was born dead but there were discrepancies in their recollections of who decided to keep the birth secret. Elizabeth Mellows, Ann Parker's servant, said that she heard Ann Manning tell Mrs. Sands to "keep it secret." She said that "she never heard that such a thing was kept secret" and Ann Manning said that she "meant to send the negro to Barbados." Just as Stretton had indicated he would send Joan Nevill away to Rhode Island if she was found to be pregnant, Manning likely thought that sending Zipporah to the West Indies would stifle gossip about her condition. African and Indian servants and slaves risked being sent far from home and into much more physically dangerous servitude if they misbehaved or brought shame on their households, a critical difference that set them apart from white servant women who might have had more ability to determine their fate. Sands said that she had asked Ann Manning if her father, Boston commissioner Richard Parker, should be told but Ann Manning said that "providence had ordered it to be secret" and she "was not willing her father should know of it because he was on his oath," meaning that he would have to report the birth as a crime. Ann Parker said that when the child was born, she suggested to Zipporah that she "get a negro woman to her" but that Zipporah refused because she "desired me that it might not be public." Ann Manning also said that they did not reveal the birth "because Zipporah did so cry and desire it might be kept secret." Zipporah, however, said that it was Parker and Manning who told her to bury the child in secret. In the end, Zipporah was not convicted of murder because the jury determined that the body that was found was not her child, but they could not determine whose it was or who had murdered it—perhaps an indication that some secrets could be kept after all.¹²⁰ The women who tried to keep the birth secret, Ann Parker and Ann Manning, were

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Mellows examination, Zipporah's examination, Mrs. Sands examination, Anne Manning examination, and Mrs. Parker testimony, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 5, #605.

“admonished in the public congregation” in Boston’s First Church for “concealing the sin of fornication in their negro servant.”¹²¹ Between the court case and the church’s proceedings, the secret they worked so hard to keep had been exposed to the whole community.

Zipporah’s status as an African slave put her in a precarious position because she lacked a support network that might have given her an alternative to relying on the kindness and protection of her mistress. This was not true for Maria, a Spanish Indian servant owned by Stephen French who also gave birth in secret, not in her mistress’s house but in a neighboring wigwam where she had gone after her pains began. While the Indians who lived in the wigwam may not have been her blood kin, her retreat to that space seems perhaps to have been an effort to find some support among the non-English community. It did not protect her, however, from the gossip of the men who lived there and the English men they told about the birth. As with Zipporah, the primary issue was not that Maria was unmarried but that the pregnancy did not result in a living child and this led to suspicions that the baby had been murdered.¹²² Both English and Indian members of the community investigated to see if a body could be located, and it was men who took the lead in bringing the birth to public attention.

Maria’s pregnancy had not been a secret kept from the English women in the community. Hannah French testified that Maria had been sick for several weeks before she left for the wigwam and had told her that she feared her child would not live.¹²³ Her illness was such that

The primary evidence that the corpse was not Zipporah’s baby was that it was white. Sanborn has suggested, and Morris concurs, that the real secret in Zipporah’s case was that the father was not Jeffero, an enslaved man, but Richard Parker’s nephew Jonathan. Sanborn, “The Case of the Headless Baby: Did Interracial Sex in the Massachusetts Bay Colony Lead to Infanticide and the Earliest Habeas Corpus Petition in America?,” 258; Morris, *Under Household Government*, 202–8. Their conclusions might explain why Zipporah does not seem to have been interrogated about the child’s paternity during her birth pains.

¹²¹ Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 59.

¹²² Plane, *Colonial Intimacies*, 97.

¹²³ Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 19, #1689.

Hannah “could not believe that a woman in her condition could breed and bring forth a living child.” Ebette Hunt said that she was often at Stephen French’s house and affirmed that Maria had been ill, and that “it was not likely that she could breed or bring forth a living child.” She also heard Maria “often complain to me” that her child was dying. Hannah French said that Maria had left on a Saturday morning and gone to the wigwam despite her efforts to persuade her to stay. These women do not seem to have investigated when no child appeared, probably because they assumed she would not have a successful pregnancy, and other women sought information only after they were approached by men from both the English and Indian communities. After the birth, Sarah Pratt said that John Vining told her “there was a child born at the Indian wigwam and that it was throwed out to the hogs and they had eat some of it.” Pratt told Hannah Whitmarsh and the two women went to the wigwam, where they found Maria and another woman who said they did not know where the baby could be found because “they see no child.” Pratt and Whitmarsh went outside and looked around but found nothing except something like an afterbirth that “to our best understanding and apprehension...had been much corrupted and wasted in the womb together with the child.”¹²⁴

Before the women had been enlisted in the search for a child’s body, both Charles the Indian and John Vining had eagerly shared information with English men and encouraged their investigations. The information Charles brought to the English men had come from a woman. Thomas Deake testified that Charles the Indian came to his house and said that his wife told him Maria had given birth but he could not find the baby, only “something which was rotten which his wife shew him” and he did not know what it was but “he think English women call it bagg.”

¹²⁴ Hannah French testimony, Ebette Hunt testimony, and Sarah Pratt testimony, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 19, #1689.

Deake went to the wigwam the next day and asked the Indians there if they found the baby and they said that they had not. Deake also said that he went with Charles, John Randole, and John Vining to try to find the place where Vining thought the baby had been buried. They located the spot but noted that it did not look like it had been “digged nor broke at all but was full of briers.” A little way off they saw a broken patch of ground but Charles told them that it was the place where another Indian girl had been digging for groundnuts. Deake interrogated “as many as I could, that I can understand did belong to the wigwam at that time” and none said that they had seen a baby.¹²⁵

Paternity does not seem to have been an important issue in the cases of Zipporah and Maria, probably in part because of their race but also because there was no living child in need of maintenance. The identity of the father was paramount in fornication cases that resulted in a living child since he could be compelled to support mother and baby and prevent them becoming a financial burden to the town.¹²⁶ When servant Judith Roby’s pregnancy was discovered, she said that John Young was the father and that they had been together in the kitchen of Moses Gillman’s house “in the night when folk were in bed.” The women who were present at Judith Roby’s childbirth in Hampton (including midwife Mary Wall, who had also attended Mary Read’s birth) said that she had repeatedly named John Young as the father during her birth pains. Young had allegedly sinned, according to Judith’s father, by “endeavoring by indirect means to draw away the affections of his daughter Judith without his consent...and for committing

¹²⁵ Thomas Deake testimony, Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 19, #1689.

¹²⁶ If Morris and Sanborn are correct, the failure to investigate paternity in Zipporah’s case was a deliberate omission intended to protect a man in the family, and protecting the household may also have been operative in Maria’s case. The year after Maria was found not guilty of infanticide, two “negro servants” who also lived in Stephen French’s household confessed and were whipped for “fornication with Maria a negro their fellow servant,” perhaps suggesting that one of them had been the father of the child. Noble, *Court of Assistants Records 1673–1692*, 1:115; *Suffolk County Court Records Part 2*, 30:991.

fornication with her to her undoing and her friends' disgrace and dishonor."¹²⁷ Judith's father advocated for her in court, and kin and friendship ties were important in her father's suit.

Zipporah and Maria lacked these kin ties or the support of a man who could advocate for them in court, which could counter the power of gossip that was wielded against an unmarried mother.

Judith Roby and John Young had found ample times and places to be alone together, according to witnesses. They were seen behaving familiarly at the sawmill, at others' houses, and at night in the house where they both lived and labored. The ample moonlight one night allowed Robert Powell and Mary Powell to see that John Young kissed and hugged Judith "several times" in the sawmill as they stood nearby. Mary Powell also said she had seen Judith sit in John Young's lap at Jonathan Thing's house, and another time she saw them call at William More's house together. Joel Judkin said that he once came home to the Gillman house and found John Young and Judith Roby awake and "the rest of the family were in bed and the door made fast and John Young's breeches were off and he was in his drawers." He also said that they were up together "many nights" after the rest of the house had gone to bed. A lodger at the Gillman house had seen them sitting up together at night after the rest of the house had gone to bed and had also seen them "go out together at unseasonable times of the night." One night another lodger woke him up and "told him that there was something to do below" and they heard John and Judith "make a clattering and noise in the room where they were." Mary Cole said that she had lived with Judith's father the previous winter and had seen Judith and John "sit together in the house and they were discoursing very familiarly together."¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Judith Roby deposition; Mary Wall, Dorly Dearhaven, Mary Herkins, and Susanna Smith deposition; and Henry Roby action, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 11, #1100.

¹²⁸ Robert and Mary Powell deposition; Joel Judkin testimony; Biels Dudley testimony; and Mary Cole deposition, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 11, #1100.

John Young tried to counter these suspicions by presenting supporting testimony from twelve of his male neighbors, including the Gillmans, who told the court that “we have known him these several years as a person resident in our town so we never knew him as a person to be addicted to any such vicious ways or actions.” Deborah Blake also said that she heard Judith Roby say that she had lived with John Young and “never saw any hurt by him.” These assertions of his good character were contradicted by the testimony of Ruth Sleeper, who said that the previous year she had been a servant at the Gillman house and one night after her mistress had gone to bed, “John Young...did carry it very uncivilly towards her striving with her and endeavoring to take up her clothes.” She escaped and two days later left to live with her father.¹²⁹

Other testimony indicated that Young may not have been the father at all and these witnesses instead laid blame at the feet of Joel Judkins. Many people were able to testify that Judith and Joel Judkins had been together and that there were indications she would lie about the paternity of her child. The volume of observation shows that a couple could escape the immediate sanction of masters and mistresses but did not go unobserved or unnoticed. Numerous people testified to seeing Roby and Judkins together in suspicious circumstances at the sawmill and near the brewhouse, and others who lived in the house with them said that they would frequently “absent themselves out of the house sometimes going together and sometimes one after another,” and that sometimes they had not returned by morning. There were also indications that Judith may not have been truthful in her confession about being with John Young. She was unable to provide specific answers when examined about their relationship and

¹²⁹ Petition on behalf of John Young; Deborah Blake deposition; and Ruth Sleeper deposition, all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 11, #1100.

some witnesses suggested that she planned to falsely accuse someone of fathering the child. Five women and one man testified to numerous conversations about the pregnancy and paternity, including suggestions that Judkins advised her to “lay it to someone that was able to maintain it.” Judith’s reputation was important in determining the truth of these competing versions of her social life. Testimony indicated that she was prone to nightwalking and resisted correction from her master, mistress, and friends.¹³⁰ Her disobedience in these areas implied that she might also be prone to lying. Judith’s position as a servant and the apparent lack of attention to her comings and goings gave opportunity for her and John Young to be alone together, which not only made her vulnerable to gossip but also made him vulnerable to claims of paternity.

“offered her uncleanness”¹³¹

Sexual Relations between Masters and Servants

Servants’ sexual relationships were of interest to their fellow servants and to their masters and mistresses, but how or whether the information they gathered would be addressed were complicated questions when servants were involved in sexual relationships with members of the families in which they labored. These relationships tested the loyalties of servants, neighbors, and family members and also threatened the hierarchies that ordered Massachusetts society. Servant women were vulnerable to seduction or abuse by their masters. Several churches recorded disciplinary cases related to fornication with servants. In one ten-year span, Boston’s First Church excommunicated three different men for committing adultery or fornication with

¹³⁰ Samuel Dalton deposition; Elizabeth Dudley and Elizabeth Gillman depositions; Elizabeth Gillman testimony; Katherine Hilton, Elizabeth Gillman, and Mary Foulsham deposition; John Palmer and Deborah Blake deposition; Moses Gillman and Elizabeth Gillman depositions; Biles Dudley depositions; Christian Dolhoft and Dennis Seone deposition; Thomas Grower and Joseph Taylor deposition; Peter Folsham and Thomas Rolines deposition; Thomas Hewes and Joseph Taylor depositions; Christian Dolhaft deposition; and Samuel Foulsham deposition; all in Suffolk County (Mass.) Court Files, 1629–1797, volume 11, #1100.

¹³¹ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:238.

their maid servants.¹³² In the Reading Church, John Bachellor Jr. had become a church member, but then it was “blazed abroad” that he had “offer[ed] some dalliance with one maid servant of his after another” and he confessed after this gossip began to spread.¹³³ Accusations or suspicions that may have been previously known only to some were made public in disciplinary proceedings or court cases, giving official sanction to gossip that had been circulating and allowing rumors to reach wider audiences.

The power differential inherent in a master-servant relationship makes consent a difficult issue to untangle, but certainly servant girls and young women would have been limited in their ability to refuse.¹³⁴ A case in Essex County in which a maid accused her master of physically and sexually assaulting her eventually involved more than forty people from the community: in addition to the maid, her master, and four other family members, the case involved testimony from eight neighbors and implicated many others, and solicited a petition from twenty-seven men regarding the character and behavior of the master. A domestic dispute over what might have happened in a maid’s bedchamber was clearly something other than “private” and revealed that the surrounding community had been engaged in observing, assessing, and discussing both the master and the maid for some time before the charges came to the attention of the court or church.

In September 1660, John Jackson was brought before the Essex County quarterly court and fined for “attempting to assault his maid and for filthy speeches.” The servant, Mary Some, swore that while her mistress was away he had “offered her uncleanness four times.” The case

¹³² Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 44, 46, 56.

¹³³ Cooper and Minkema, “Reading Church Records,” 79.

¹³⁴ On issues of power and consent, see Block, *Rape and Sexual Power*, chap. 2. See also Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 144–46.

had begun months earlier, however. In late June, John Jackson had given a statement apparently in response to charges that he had sexually assaulted Mary. He claimed that he had woken one morning and noticed that Mary was not yet out of bed so he went to her chamber and “shook her by the shoulder and asked whether it were not time to rise and go about my business for there was a great deal of work to do” and then he went back to his own bed. He said that he had never attempted to “lie with her” and that her accusations had “done me abundance of wrong in defaming my name.” He said that she “reports of me” because he had “called her out of her bed several times before.” In other words, she was retaliating because she had been told to work. In early July John Jackson was brought back before the court and a petition was presented testifying to his good character; twenty-seven Gloucester men affixed their signatures or marks to a statement that their “neighbor John Jackson senior” had lived there for seven years and had “behaved himself in good order so far as we can or could see and lived honestly.”¹³⁵

Further testimony by those who observed and noted Mary’s behavior called her credibility into question, detailing her bad behavior and unwillingness to work. Anthony Day, who had signed the petition in support of Jackson, said that he had been working at the Jacksons’ house and overheard Goody Jackson tell Mary Comes to “do her work.” But when Goody Jackson was away from the house, Mary “idled and meddled with his work so much that he told her to go into the lot and help her poor old master.” He also heard Mary tell both her master and mistress to “do it your self” when they told her to do her work. Zacheas Curtis also said that he heard Mary refuse to do the work she was set to by Mrs. Jackson, and when Goody Jackson responded by giving her “a nick upon the arm,” Mary “cried out and spoke bad language, until Jackson’s wife told her to hold her tongue.” Goody Jackson then “gave her a blow with the back

¹³⁵ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:236–38.

of her hand.”¹³⁶ The implication was that if Mary was an idler or prone to backtalk, or if she had a grudge against her employers, she was also likely to lie or exaggerate about being assaulted.

The testimony of the men who questioned Mary’s character stands in contrast to the women who told the court about Mary’s reactions on the morning she claimed to have been assaulted. Grace Duch, whose husband signed the petition supporting Jackson, testified that John Haymans said that “there was a very sad thing done that morning, that old Jackson had assaulted his maid, that the maid cried out and made a doleful noise.” Duch went to the Jacksons’ house and “found the maid crying, wishing herself dead.” Susanna Jackson, John Jackson’s daughter-in-law, told Duch that she had “heard the cries” and then Mary came running down the stairs and “said it had happened several times before.” Susanna Jackson said Mary told her “the old man tried to kiss her and she bit his nose.” Ruth Jones said that when Mary came out of her room, Susana Jackson asked what was wrong and she said “the same thing happened three times before.” The following night Mary Some “lay on a chest” in Susanna’s room and said she “was afraid to go to bed in her own chamber.” Sara Vinson remembered that Mary Some had told her she wanted to leave the Jacksons’ house and that “the devil would not live with them.”¹³⁷

Neighborhood women were not the only ones concerned about Mary’s treatment at the Jackson house, however. The Jacksons found themselves in court again that autumn when the constable was fined for refusing to serve a warrant to return Mary Some to her master. The warrant claimed that John Pearce had “taken her away from his service” and the case turned on whether he had done so out of conscience or in an attempt to extort money from the Jacksons. A

¹³⁶ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:237–38.

¹³⁷ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:237–38.

few months before, the constable had been approached by John Emerson and William Browne after they received a “solemn and serious complaint made to them by divers neighbors of John Jackson, Sr., concerning the ill-behavior of said Jackson toward his maid, Mary Somes.” These neighbors told Emerson and Brown that they were afraid Goodwife Jackson would kill Mary when she heard that Mary had made complaint about her husband. Neighbors knew that complaining had put Somes in danger and by reporting the threat to authority they had absolved themselves of responsibility for her well-being. The two men took the neighbors’ concerns to Pearce, the constable, and expected him to “take some speedy course for the prevention of any such mischief” and told him they would hold him accountable if “any such mischief did follow through the neglect of any speedy course that he might take before the said Goodw[ife] Jacks[on] came to hear of her maids complaint against her husband.”¹³⁸ Whether the constable was trying to protect Mary is open to doubt, but certainly neighbors were worried about their culpability if they failed to notify authority about what they had seen and heard.

* * *

When words traveled through the streets and houses of early New England, they were often carried by the mouths of servants. While servants’ precarious social positions made them vulnerable to wayward talk, they also had power that came from being privy to secret conversations and private encounters in their households. This made masters, mistresses, and their families vulnerable themselves to those at the bottom of the social scale and created opportunities for servants to assert themselves in church and in court. Servants were expected to keep their household’s secrets, but this expectation was overlooked when their words could serve

¹³⁸ *Essex County Quarterly Court Records*, 2:257.

the interests of those in power and particularly when their words could support the efforts of men and magistrates to reign in wayward women, but the threat was always present that servants' words could turn on the wrong people. This threat could only be minimized by discrediting servants whose tongues wagged in the wrong directions. The regularity with which gossip shaped outcomes for masters and for servants meant that reputation was an important way of determining whose words would be believed. Servants' reputations determined whether they would be given employment, whether they would be retained in their placements, and whether they would be believed if they found themselves mistreated. While gossip was a tool often used skillfully by New England's servants, their reputations were always on trial, particularly if they brought complaints against prominent members of the community. It is impossible to know how many cases were dealt with informally or how many servants endured mistreatment because they were unwilling or unable to risk public scrutiny of their own lives and reputations. The power of gossip and the importance of reputation in seventeenth-century Massachusetts meant that servants and their masters were locked in uneasy struggle to maintain proper hierarchies and household government while also creating opportunities for lower status members of the community to shape the world in which they lived.

CHAPTER FIVE

Notorious Breeches: Ministers, Sex Scandals, and the Politics of Gossip

Servant women are often invisible in the records of early New England, but ministers certainly were not. Gossip and watchfulness amplified the precarity of servants' lives and livelihoods, making them vulnerable to accusations that could threaten their livelihoods but also providing a way to seek safety from predatory or abusive masters. Ministers, who sat on the opposite end of the social spectrum, were also aware of the consequences of talk. Their status and authority could insulate them from gossip's effects but their visibility invited scrutiny. Like servants, reputation and gossip could help ministers secure or keep a position but could also cause them to lose their livelihoods. Ministers, however, had protections that servant women lacked.

Ministers were keen collectors of gossip, both in their roles as community guardians and perhaps just as busybodies.¹ Ministers were often responsible for spreading news, gossip, and rumors from the pulpit, and their congregants would have immediately identified their lightly disguised commentary on local events and personalities. This calls into question the gendered conception of gossip that prevailed then and now, but also shows how watchfulness and covenant relationships complicated distinctions between trivial knowledge and information with public implications. Ministers' and women's gossip intersected most glaringly when those religious leaders became the subjects of talk in congregations and towns. Ministers' public roles

¹ On ministers as moral arbiters, see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 18–19.

and women's talk about them reveal contradictions and conflicts inherent in a culture that both empowered women and made them subordinate. Gossip shared by servants and by ministers both had the potential to influence both family government and the government of colonies and churches.

For these most public figures in seventeenth-century New England, reputation was of paramount importance, a point driven home by Cotton Mather's repeated ruminations in his diary.² Ministers were particularly vulnerable to sexual scandals because they often found themselves alone with women, married or not, and in situations of spiritual intimacy that could easily be mistaken for a different kind of intimacy if their reputations were at all suspect. They met with women in private spiritual conferences, outside the supervision of male family members and the community at large. As an alternate source of male authority and in a religious culture that advocated individuals' relationships with God, ministers presented a potential challenge to husbands' authority over their wives. Ministers were also meant to maintain high standards of behavior and had an important role in modeling good order. Rumors about their intimate lives forced communities to confront situations in which clergy became a source of disorder, violating the trust of their congregants and threatening the reputations of their communities. Sexual indiscretions also became evidence against ministers who had otherwise transgressed in public ways, most often through politically aligning themselves in ways that were offensive to powerful ministers and magistrates in Boston. In this way, the scandals transcended religious life and became political scandals as well.³

² See, for example, his lengthy fretting about the effects on his reputation of a courtship gone wrong. Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:466–94.

³ The literature on political sex scandals is vast. A small selection includes Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Founding Fathers: The American Quest for a Relatable Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); John H. Summers, "What Happened to Sex Scandals? Politics and Peccadilloes, Jefferson to Kennedy," *Journal of American History* 87 (2000): 825–54; Bonomi, *Lord Cornbury Scandal*.

To say that accusations of sexual misconduct were enmeshed in political strife is not to say that rumors were unfounded or that women were being manipulated into reporting. Women had nothing to gain and a lot to lose by levying these charges. In the eyes of their churches and communities, they could easily be blamed or judged equally culpable even if they claimed to have been forced or coerced, particularly if they had not immediately reported the incident to men in authority. Women had political opinions just as men did and, in some ways, had more investment in the churches than their fathers and husbands, particularly after mid-century when male membership declined and women constituted the majority of church members.⁴ The common argument made by later historical chroniclers that they made false accusations because they were being manipulated for political ends is spurious but the idea that they only went public because of those conflicts is probably accurate. These cases show that women were important actors in shaping the leadership of new settlements, even when the recollection of them in the historical record can make them seem little more than pawns. These cases also reveal New England to have been a complicated place for women, a religious culture in which they were empowered to threaten the authority of ministers through accusations of immorality but also one in which ministers could be easily forgiven and in which women's own reputations were as much on trial as those of the adulterous clerics.⁵ Threats to women's safety seem to have been taken seriously in the case of ministers who were perceived as predatory, however, and a

⁴ Dunn, "Saints and Sisters," 590–95.

⁵ On the complicated nature of New England patriarchy, see Ulrich, "Winthrop's City of Women." Studies of sexual assault in early America have often focused on the reputations of the accused rather than on the witnesses. See Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, chs. 8 and 9.

surprising number of ministers were unable to overcome allegations that they had preyed upon female congregants or servants when those stories did come to light.⁶

Ministers' reputations were shaped not only by their colleagues but also by ordinary men and women who made allegations, who stood before councils and courts to detail those accusations, and who risked their own reputations to do so. Men in positions of authority did not always align themselves with their fellow leaders but instead were willing to hear accusations and act upon them. They may have had political motives for doing so, but male elites' openness allowed ordinary people to shape their religious communities. Those making allegations had their own aims, whether to protect themselves and their families from predatory clerics, to protect their own reputations, to protect their communities from risks to their collective reputation, or because of their own political alignments. In a puritan culture seemingly dominated by ministerial leadership, however, ordinary people felt empowered, at least in some cases, to talk about ministers in ways that were felt in the highest reaches of the religious and political hierarchy, due in no small part to the ideological and social weight carried by the idea of a "priesthood of all believers." These cases show that ordinary women had the ability to shape events through their watchfulness and their gossip, but also that their power was limited by authorities' willingness to hear and heed those words.

Historians, antiquarians, and historical editors have shaped the memory of seventeenth-century ministers and hidden or exposed their transgressions in ways that have continued to make women's words subject to the needs of men and their politics. Historians of colonial New England have often rendered the voices of those who challenged ministers inaudible and

⁶ This confirms findings by Dayton and Norton that women's testimony was given credence in early New England court cases. Dayton, *Women Before the Bar*; Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*.

interpreted their words in ways that benefited the goals of remembrance. It should give us pause that the sources for some of early New England's most debated and contentious episodes are not court or church records in which accuracy was prioritized but were instead penned by men with vested interests in giving a particular interpretation of events and who benefited from the lack of corroboration for any other viewpoints. The men who wrote about controversies needed to prove their evidence and they did this by emphasizing letters and words from men of good reputation. Women recede from the narrative even when their words were of utmost importance. In each case, the absence of testimony from the women making accusations has allowed later historians, antiquarians, and genealogists to make claims about the motives behind allegations and justify the authorities' reactions, whether that was banishment or rehabilitation. The women at the center of these stories have been erased and, in many cases, we do not even know their names.

The scandals that engulfed prominent men in New England show how all the arms of watchfulness—law enforcement, church government, women's talk, informal rumors, and competing authorities—could be harnessed in the service of civil order, and also how all the evidence could be discounted for political motives. These cases show that gossip was wielded as a political tool and that women could shape the parts of public life we too often assume to have been closed to them. Women's words were not law, however, and their talk was ignored or set aside when expedient. When men had motives other than women's safety, the women at the heart of these stories became secondary. In relationships of unequal power, women were able to exert influence but their power was limited. In these intersections of politics and gossip, men in power could harness or ignore women's words for their own purposes. Surveying a series of cases in which ministers were accused of sexual impropriety shows the different reactions to accusations that depended on the status of the accused and the accusers as well as the motives of

those who publicized the accusations. These cases all came from outside Boston and often from the fringes of English settlement in New England, places that were associated with disorder and in which puritan orthodoxy maintained a tenuous hold. The stories were harnessed by those in seats of power in Boston, however, showing how information traveled and how local gossip could have colony-wide implications.

**“former wickednesses by him committed”⁷
Conformity and Disloyalty in Early Plymouth Colony**

John Lyford’s arrival in Plymouth colony in 1624 should have been a relief. He was a minister and the settlers there had been without ordained religious leadership and therefore unable to celebrate the sacraments since their arrival in New England four years before. Any relief they felt was short-lived, however, and the rapid end of Lyford’s New England ministry soon became notorious.⁸ Before the year was out he would be banished from the colony as “an enemy to the plantation,” dogged by rumors and scandals about both his religious beliefs and his adulterous relationships. He had been revealed to be a fomentor of faction and discord in the newly established and fragile colony, a traitor to their cause, and a flagrant adulterer, blamed for hastening the end of the already contentious relationship between Plymouth colony and the London Adventurers who sent him there. John Lyford’s abbreviated career in Plymouth shows

⁷ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1: 61.

⁸ Their guiding minister, John Robinson, had opted to stay in Leiden rather than migrate when that congregation split. Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 117. Sources for Lyford’s time in Plymouth are scant. The fullest account is in William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 147–78. Bradford’s narrative of Lyford’s exploits in New England is repeated almost verbatim in Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; Nathaniel Morton, *New-England’s Memoriall: Or, A Brief Relation of the Most Memorable and Remarkable Passages of the Providence of God, Manifested to the Planters of New-England in America; With Special Reference to the First Colony Thereof, Called New-Plimouth* (Cambridge, MA: S.G. and M.J. for John Usher, 1669). The narrative was also inserted by Morton, in slightly modified form, in Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*. An alternate view can be found in Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan* (Amsterdam: Iacob Frederick Stam, 1637). Useful assessments of the Lyford case can be found in Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 104–6; Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, chap. 5; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 60–62.

the precarity of religion and politics in the colony's early years, and the way that accusations of sexual impropriety leveled against him have been recounted show how interpretations of his career have been shaped to suit different ends.⁹

Lyford arrived in Plymouth on a ship that carried desperately needed supplies sent by the London Adventurers, the financial backers of the colonial venture, in response to numerous complaints from colonists that they lacked necessities as well as the spiritual sustenance of the sacraments.¹⁰ On arrival Lyford showed the colony's leaders excessive humility that some saw in retrospect as a sign of dissembling, but despite initial discomfort he soon became a church member and was invited by the governor to participate in private meetings that gave him access to information about governance and decision-making. Lyford also quickly made common cause with John Oldham, a trader who had previously been an opponent of the colony's leadership but who seemed temporarily pacified by the minister's arrival and now admitted to the colony that he had done them wrong "both by word and deed" and was forgiven.¹¹

Lyford's obsequiousness and Oldham's apologies gave the appearance of harmony but this illusion did not last. Lyford and Oldham formed a faction that opposed Plymouth's leadership, a faction whose mission was to undermine the separatist church and disparage the colony among their contacts in England. As Lyford and Oldham gathered their allies around them, according to the colony's governor William Bradford, "there was nothing but private meetings and whisperings amongst them; they feeding themselves and others with what they should bring to pass in England by the faction of their friends there." Leaders of the Plymouth

⁹ Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, xxiii.

¹⁰ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1:60; Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, 117–22.

¹¹ Morton, *New-England's Memoriall*, 54; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 147–49; Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 22:55.

colony worried not only about disruptions of the public peace and threats to their fledgling church, but also and particularly about the effect Lyford's and Oldham's words would have when they reached the colony's doubters and enemies in England. Maintaining a good reputation among their supporters at home was vital for securing financial and material support and for attracting new settlers among nonconformists. Their secret whisperings made Plymouth's leaders wary of the two men but the governor needed evidence of their nefarious intentions. He found the evidence he needed after suspicious colonists observed Lyford and Oldham "send away a large packet of letters, and drop some words which gave suspicion of their carrying on a private correspondence to the prejudice of the plantation." Bradford went out to the ship and intercepted their letters to Plymouth's "adversaries," opened the packet, and made copies. The letters confirmed Bradford's suspicion that Lyford was acting as a spy for the Adventurers and actively working to undermine their church and government.¹²

Intercepting and opening letters bore a strong resemblance to eavesdropping, making public what had been said in private, undermining efforts to deceive or conceal, and demonstrating the extent to which written communication could take on the flavor of gossip.¹³ Bradford did not immediately reveal what he had found but the intercepted letters confirmed that Lyford, Oldham, and their adherents planned to set up their own church and they soon made good on that plan, "beginning now publicly to act what privately they had been long plotting." Once they acted on their intentions, the governor called together a court where Lyford was accused of knowingly deceiving them at the time of his admission as part of a calculated,

¹² Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 55–56; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 149, 151–52; Daniel Neal, *The History of New-England* (London: J. Clark, R. Ford, and R. Cruttenden, 1720), 106–7; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 60–61.

¹³ On letters as "truth-telling gestures" in Bradford's narrative, see Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 62.

premeditated effort to supplant their church. When Lyford denied the charges, Bradford brought out the letters and read them aloud, which discredited Lyford with his allies in the colony who could now see that “besides his evil dealing here, [he] had dealt treacherously with his friends that trusted him, and stole their letters and opened them, and sent copies of them, with disgraceful annotations, to his friends in England.” There is no little irony in the righteous indignation displayed by Bradford about the stolen and copied letters that were only discovered because he had stolen and copied Lyford’s letters. Lyford was convicted and gave what seemed a satisfactory confession of his wrongs both in church and the court, which led the colony’s leaders to delay his sentence of banishment for six months in the hope that he would demonstrate truly reformed behavior. Their lenience was rewarded with more treachery, however, when “notwithstanding all his former confessions, convictions, and public acknowledgments, both in the face of the church and whole company,” he was found to have written another letter to the Adventurers in England disparaging the colony’s government and church.¹⁴

Lyford’s religious and political misdeeds led to revelations about his morality. When Lyford became a member of the Plymouth church he had made “an acknowledgment of his former disorderly walking and his being entangled with many corruptions, which had been a burden to his conscience.”¹⁵ Despite this confession, most members of the Plymouth church were probably unaware of the extent to which Lyford had burdened his conscience in the years prior to his arrival until his wife began to talk. Sarah Lyford was apparently so distraught about her husband’s machinations against the colony and the threat of banishment that she now decided

¹⁴ Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 55–58; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 149–53, 158–60. Oldham, on the other hand, was told to leave at once, the only concession being that his wife and children were allowed to stay until he had relocated and was able to support them. See Bradford, 158.

¹⁵ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 148.

to tell “one of their deacons and some other of her friends” about her “grief and sorrow of mind.” She feared the banishment resulting from his actions would bring God’s judgment upon her and that she would “fall into the Indians’ hands and to be defiled by them as he had defiled other women.”¹⁶ Before their marriage she had heard “some dark and secret mutterings” that her intended husband had fathered a child with another woman. When she confronted him with these rumors he “stiffly denied it” and she agreed to go forward with the marriage, but the story was later proved true and “the bastard brought home to them.” The Lyfords’ marriage was, according to Bradford, plagued by infidelity, and Sarah Lyford “could keep no maids but he would be meddling with them; and some time she hath taken him in the manner, as they lay at their beds’ feet.”¹⁷

The veracity of Sarah Lyford’s story was confirmed when “another thing of the same nature” was reported by two representatives of the Plymouth colony who had recently returned from England. The men reported that “friends amongst the company” said they had heard stories about Lyford’s sexual indiscretions and that they had assurances from “two godly and grave witnesses” who would testify about him under oath. These revelations were even more odious than Sarah Lyford’s confessions suggested. The colonial representatives’ informants said that one of Lyford’s parishioners in Ireland had sought his opinion about a woman he wanted to marry. Lyford met with her “sundry times” in private conference and reported to the man that she would be “a very fit wife for him.” The couple married but shortly thereafter “the woman was much troubled in mind and afflicted in conscience, and did nothing but weep and mourn.” She finally admitted to her new husband that “Lyford had overcome her and defiled her body

¹⁶ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 166–67.

¹⁷ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 167; Morton, *New-England’s Memoriall*, 60–61.

before marriage...when he came to her in that private way.” Lyford’s transgression was doubly wicked because he abused his position as minister and the privacy that this position accorded him in meeting with female parishioners. Bradford suggested that there might be even worse details but he chose not to reveal them, “for they would offend chaste ears to hear them related (for though he satisfied his lust on her, yet he endeavored to hinder conception).” That these details were known to the men who circulated the story but withheld from the reader was likely meant to lend credibility to the tale and the tale-teller. Bradford reported that the wronged husband “took some godly friends with him to deal with Lyford for this evil” and Lyford confessed; he departed Ireland for the colonies shortly after, “partly for shame and partly for fear of further punishment.”¹⁸

These stories became public knowledge first in England and then in Plymouth because the Adventurers held a meeting to discuss Lyford. In this “great assembly” held in London to address the letters, one of the men from Plymouth responded to one of Lyford’s defenders by exclaiming that Lyford “had dealt knavishly.” Lyford’s defenders threatened legal action against the colonial representatives for slander, at which point “witnesses were produced, whose persons were so grave and evidence so plain and the fact so foul, yet delivered in such modest and chaste terms and with such circumstances as struck all his friends mute, and made them all ashamed.” Based on this new information, the moderators silenced Lyford’s defenders and declared him “unmeet forever to bear ministry any more, what repentance soever he should pretend.” Now denied a place as minister and the support of his supposed allies in both old and New England, Lyford moved on, finally settling in Virginia. The scandal also severed relations between the

¹⁸ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 168–69; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 61–62. On Lyford as part of a larger story of ministers exploiting privacy and physical proximity, see Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 93.

colony and the Adventurers. The London investors withdrew their assistance and no longer offered supplies, “leaving the plantation to shift for itself, and stand or fall as it could.” Sarah Lyford’s reputation was apparently unsullied by the scandal, however, and she returned to Massachusetts with her children after Lyford’s death, where she remarried and was evidently a woman of good repute until her death in Hingham in 1649.¹⁹

Information about Lyford’s misdeeds comes to us through the words of partisans who sought to discredit Lyford’s claims in the debate over Plymouth’s early religious and political culture. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors who recounted Lyford’s story all relied heavily on William Bradford’s narrative of events, often reproducing it verbatim. With these same words, however, authors were able to use Lyford to illustrate the various dangers that beset them in their own time and shape a narrative about early Plymouth that suited their own needs. What did not differ was their near-complete erasure of the women Lyford was said to have harmed. His wife was not named, and neither were the women who claimed to have been seduced, assaulted, or exploited by him. Witnesses are vague in the narratives and much of the information is rumor or speculation. The colony’s leaders reported that Sarah Lyford’s tales were reliable because she was “a grave matron, and of good carriage all the while she was here.”²⁰ In relating the story, however, Bradford and Morton both muted her identity and only their assessment of her reputation remains. Her status as both a wife and a well-regarded woman was the only evidence the reader presumably needed to evaluate her claims. Her stories were further supported by the fact that she told them to the deacon in addition to her female friends, making them more reliable than if they had just been whispered among women. The same was

¹⁹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 169–70; William Hubbard, *A General History of New England, from the Discovery to 1680* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1848), 93–94.

²⁰ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 167.

true of his accuser in Ireland, who had told her husband. These authors did not reproduce Sarah Lyford's testimony, or the words of Lyford's accuser in Ireland, like they did the testimony and letters authored by men.²¹

Far more important to Hubbard, and to Nathaniel Morton, Thomas Morton, and Cotton Mather, were the ways that the story of John Lyford's failed ministry could illustrate their assessments the early years of the Plymouth colony. Nathaniel Morton saw justice in Lyford's shame. The minister's past transgressions came into the open as a way that "brought to naught their wicked devices," thereby "punishing one sin by another."²² Hubbard argued that Morton's *New England Memorial* had judged Plymouth's separatists too harshly. In Hubbard's view, Lyford's religious principles were incompatible with Plymouth's designs and charges of sexual wrongdoing provided a means to remove him. Accusations against him came from those who "could not be contented till they had shut their hands of him, alleging things against him of another nature than difference of his judgment." Hubbard noted that those who kept records of Plymouth's early years "left a very bad character of him" and had emphasized that Lyford "was not only very fickle and unconstant in his judgment about the things of religion, but as one that wanted soundness and uprightness in his practice and conversation." He did not deny that Lyford's actions were troubling, but Hubbard's argument was rooted in the problems of his own present. Plymouth was much more diverse than Massachusetts Bay Colony, populated not only by pious reformers but also by large numbers of strangers and separatists which made controversies and questions about enforcing religious orthodoxy much sharper there. The heterodox population, along with their difficulty in securing and keeping a minister, made

²¹ On the use of letters in Bradford's narrative and its relationship to truth-telling and credit, see Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, chap. 1.

²² Morton, *New-England's Memoriall*, 61.

Plymouth's religious situation as delicate as their political and economic circumstances. Hubbard compared the "viler and looser sort" that were drawn to Lyford's faction to those that he observed during the "perilous times in these latter, as well as in former, days." Simply put, the colonists had been fooled and others risked the same. Hubbard argued that those who arrived with Lyford were unaware of "the wickedness he was guilty of in Ireland" and had "judged of him much better than ever he deserved." Those people believed that Lyford's biggest "error" was his opposition to separation from the church of England and "some of their friends yet surviving" continued to believe that the source of the dispute was Lyford's decision to baptize the child of someone who was not a member of the Plymouth church rather than treasonous letters or sexual wickedness.²³

Another view of Lyford's case can be found in the narrative written by Thomas Morton. Morton was no friend of the Plymouth colony that had repeatedly driven him out of their jurisdiction and punished him with banishment and destruction of his property. He used Lyford's downfall as an illustration of the separatists' intolerance and dangerous innovation. In this telling, the colony turned against Lyford when the minister refused to renounce his ordination from the Church of England and submit to a new one in their church "after their fantastical invention." Lyford and Oldham "both together did maintain the Church of England, to be a true church" although they admitted it had some shortcomings, and this "cancelled their good opinion, amongst the number of the separatists." Plymouth therefore needed a reason to get rid of Lyford without inflaming religious tensions, according to Morton, and they found it in his past. They "found out some scandal, to be laid on his former course of life, to blemish that,

²³ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 91–94. Most historians have described Lyford as an "Anglican" or conformist, but Winship argues convincingly that he was a nonconformist puritan who opposed the separatism of the Leiden congregation. Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, 123.

and so to conclude he was a spotted beast” and needed to be removed.²⁴ Morton hints at the ways that writers who elided the identities of Lyford’s accusers and stigmatized his adherents also erased the majority of colonists who were strangers or servants rather than separatists, opportunists rather than pilgrims.²⁵

By the early eighteenth century, Lyford was remembered as a “crafty knave” who infiltrated the colony’s leadership as a means to “ruin the reputation of the colony with the Merchant-Adventurers in England, that so they might be afraid to trade with them any longer.” Lyford’s aim, according to Daniel Neal, was no less than the destruction of the Plymouth colony. The scandal of his adulteries had completely receded from the story and all that remained was his religious and political treachery.²⁶ Even Cotton Mather saw Lyford as a warning to his peers rather than an illustration of hardships overcome by the early settlers.²⁷ Mather cautioned that New England should be wary of men who laid claim to pulpits without being known to them, highlighting the vulnerability of these now-established colonies to deceitful imposters who might try to ingratiate themselves with well-intentioned but misguided believers. Mather argued that histories which exposed the treachery of imposters to the pulpit were a punishment equivalent to

²⁴ Morton, *New English Canaan*, 118–19. On Morton’s contentious relationship with Plymouth Colony and with Bradford, see Matt Cohen, “Morton’s Maypole and the Indians: Publishing in Early New England,” *Book History* 5 (2002): 1–18; Richard Drinnon, “The Maypole of Merry Mount: Thomas Morton and the Puritan Patriarchs,” *Massachusetts Review* 21 (1980): 382–410; Daniel B. Shea, “‘Our Professed Old Adversary’: Thomas Morton and the Naming of New England,” *Early American Literature* 23 (1988): 52–69; William Heath, “Thomas Morton: From Merry Old England to New England,” *Journal of American Studies* 41 (2007): 135–68; Goodman, *Banished*, 39–44; Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620–1675* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 89–91; John P. McWilliams Jr., “Fictions of Merry Mount,” *American Quarterly* 29 (1977): 3–30; John McWilliams, “Thomas Morton: Phoenix of New England Memory,” in *New England’s Crises and Cultural Memory: Literature, Politics, History, Religion, 1620–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44–73; Thomas Cartelli, “Transplanting Disorder: The Construction of Misrule in Morton’s ‘New English Canaan’ and Bradford’s ‘Of Plymouth Plantation,’” *English Literary Renaissance* 27 (1997): 258–80.

²⁵ Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 173–75.

²⁶ Neal, *History of New England*, 106–7.

²⁷ Conforti, *Imagining New England*, chap. 2.

the pillory, exhibiting their crimes for all to see. In the printed word, these men would be exposed “with a writing as it were in capitals, to signify, THESE WERE IMPOSTERS THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN ESTEEMED MINISTERS.” Other would-be deceivers would be deterred by public exposure of those who had done the same.²⁸ Threatening similar exposure for accusations of adultery or other sexual impropriety did not enter into his argument, despite Mather’s concerns with ministerial reputation.

Colonial representatives investigated Lyford because of their political concerns and the immorality they found gave them cause to expel him from the colony. Gossip that might otherwise have stayed largely unknown became public knowledge, and private or secret encounters were brought into the public eye because of religious and political threats to the colony. While the leaders of Plymouth Colony clearly took the accusations seriously, they might never have come to light without political motives that instigated the search for damaging information. In relegating the women to the background of Lyford’s story, later chroniclers also erased the ways that women’s words, whether told to husbands, friends, or church elders, could be deliberately used to shape political events.

“let loose the reins to his lust”²⁹

Scandal and Antinomianism in the Puritan Periphery

While Massachusetts puritans sought to reintegrate Plymouth into the religious history of New England’s settlement, the area that is now Maine and New Hampshire was considered precarious and volatile. An interlocking series of scandals there from the late 1630s through the

²⁸ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2: 539-540. On Mather and other puritan historians’ efforts to shape the memory of their forebearers, see Conforti, *Imagining New England*, chaps. 1–2; Margaret Bendroth, *The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), chap. 2.

²⁹ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 361.

mid-1650s seemed to confirm the prevailing opinion that communities far removed from port towns like Boston were disorderly, unruly, and immoral. One thing they were not, however, was unchurched. In fact, these notorious scandals that shaped this region of New England revolved around their churches and attempts to fill pulpits in an area far removed from the centers of power at Boston, Plymouth, and New Haven, and settlers' competing visions of how the religious culture should look, with conformists, non-conformists, and Antinomians all struggling for control.³⁰ Three successive ministers in what is now Dover, New Hampshire, were accused of sexual impropriety as part of larger struggles over power, theology, and politics. George Burdett has been described by historians as “manifestly a bad man” and “notoriously lecherous,” but he was not the only pastor in the northern settlements to find himself accused of sexual immorality.³¹ Two other ministers in the same town, Hanserd Knollys and Thomas Larkham, also faced accusations, and over all was the specter of John Underhill, the notorious Antinomian and seducer.

George Burdett sailed for New England in 1635 after being deprived of his pulpit in Great Yarmouth, England, for nonconformity. He first settled at Salem where he preached as an assistant to Hugh Peter and became a freeman of the colony, but by 1637 he was in Pascataqua (now Dover, New Hampshire) after reportedly leaving Salem because their discipline was too strict for what Hubbard called his “loose conscience.”³² Burdett was soon at the center of ecclesiastical and political drama in Dover. He had at first served as their minister but soon was

³⁰ Laura M. Chmielewski, *The Spice of Popery: Converging Christianities on an Early American Frontier* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), esp. 27, 181.

³¹ Nathaniel Bouton, ed., *Documents and Records Relating to the Province of New Hampshire, From the Earliest Period of Its Settlement, 1623–1686*, vol. 1 (Concord, NH: George E. Jenks, State Printer, 1867), 121; Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 265.

³² Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 353; Robert E. Moody, “Thomas Gorges, Proprietary Governor of Maine, 1640–1643,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, 75 (1963): 15.

also elected governor in the place of the proprietor's chosen governor, Thomas Wiggans, a move that infuriated leaders in Massachusetts despite the proprietor's conformist tendencies.³³

At least one source of controversy over Burdett's tenure in Pascataqua seems to have been his willingness to welcome those who had been excommunicated and banished from Massachusetts Bay in the aftermath of the Antinomian Controversy.³⁴ As John Winthrop and other opponents of the Hutchinsonians seemed to be gaining the upper hand in Boston, they feared banishment was allowing that heresy to take root in outlying settlements where their authority was weak. In November 1638, Governor Winthrop heard Pascataqua planned to install John Underhill as governor in place of Burdett and he wrote a letter on behalf of the General Court of Massachusetts to caution the settlement's leaders that "there had been good correspondence between them formerly" but this was threatened by their "their entertaining and countenancing...some whom they had cast out." Winthrop cautioned them that allowing Captain Underhill—a man about whom one historian has said "head, heart, and groin [were] united in predatory harmony"—to be in a position of authority would threaten relations between them, since Underhill had been disenfranchised, disarmed, and ousted from his position as captain

³³ Moody, "Thomas Gorges," 15–16; Rufus M Sawyer, "Agamenticus, Georgiana, or York, Maine," *Congregational Quarterly* 8 (1866): 143n3; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 353; John Scales, *History of Dover, New Hampshire*, (Tercentenary edition.), vol. 1 ([Manchester, N.H.], 1923), 105–6.

³⁴ On the Antinomian or Free Grace controversy, see especially Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*; Patricia Caldwell, "The Antinomian Language Controversy," *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976): 345–67; David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); James F. Cooper Jr., "Anne Hutchinson and the 'Lay Rebellion' against the Clergy," *New England Quarterly* 61 (1988): 381–97; Michael G. Ditmore, "A Prophetess in Her Own Country: An Exegesis of Anne Hutchinson's 'Immediate Revelation,'" *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 57 (2000): 349–92; Amy Schrager Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Anne Hutchinson, Sectarian Mysticism, and the Puritan Order," *Church History* 59 (1990): 482–96; Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620–1660* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), chaps. 3, 9; Louise A. Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds: Subversive Enterprises among the Puritan Elite in Massachusetts, 1630–1692* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), chaps. 1, 2.

because of his involvement in the Antinomian affair.³⁵ Underhill had briefly returned to England, and in September 1638 was banished from Massachusetts based on the testimony of a “sober, godly woman” who he had tried to sway to the Antinomian viewpoint while on a voyage back to Massachusetts.³⁶

Other charges against Underhill became public shortly after the sentence of banishment was passed against him. He had already been approached privately about rumors of “incontinency with a neighbor’s wife” but when these private efforts proved fruitless, the charges were put to him in public and he was admonished. Underhill said that the charges were false and that when he was repeatedly found alone with Mrs. Faber in her house with the door locked, they were simply “in private prayer together” and he was only trying “to comfort her.” The elders said the pair should have left the door unlocked to prevent suspicion that surely would have fallen on anyone in like circumstances, let alone someone with a reputation like Underhill’s. They also disputed Underhill’s claim that Mrs. Faber was “in great trouble of mind, and sore temptations.” On the contrary, they said, she was “young, and beautiful, and withal of a jovial spirit and behavior.” Underhill apparently asked the elders to visit her, “telling them that she was in great trouble of mind,” but they “perceived no such thing” when they went to see her.³⁷

³⁵ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 269, 284–85; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 354; Winship, *Making Heretics*, 230; Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds*, chap. 2. Underhill is also indirectly linked to the Lyford scandal in Plymouth. After being banished, Oldham was killed by Indians at Block Island, and Underhill led the expedition that retaliated. Scales, *History of Dover, New Hampshire*, 1:108; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 166.

³⁶ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:208, 211, 237; Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 262–64; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 351. See also the confession of Jane Holmes in McGiffert, *God’s Plot*, 173–77.

³⁷ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 264. According to Hubbard, she was “a sober young woman” who was deceived by Underhill’s “pretense of Christian love.” Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 355.

Underhill was excommunicated from the Boston church in March 1640 in part because of these charges of adultery.³⁸

Underhill's excommunication was still in the future when the Pascataqua settlement received Winthrop's letter about him, and Burdett "returned a scornful answer." This began a war of letters in which each side attempted to undermine the other. Winthrop was convinced not to summon Burdett to answer for his insolence in court because he worried that making the minister seem like a victim would "ingratiate him more with the archbishops" who sought proof of Massachusetts's severity. But Underhill wrote a letter to a man who was lodging with the Winthrops in which he "revile[d] the governor with reproachful terms and imprecations of vengeance upon us all." This letter, unsurprisingly, was shown to Winthrop. In response to these Burdett's and Underhill's letters, Winthrop decided to try to undermine Burdett's authority with his allies in Pascataqua by writing to Edward Hilton, a large landowner in Pascataqua, describing Burdett's "ill dealing" and warning them to be careful of falling under his power. Winthrop warned that the plantation needed to provide "a proof of their respect towards us" in their response to Burdett.³⁹ Winthrop's letter to Hilton was intercepted, however, and Burdett and Underhill retaliated by writing to England about Massachusetts's "combination to resist any authority, that should come out of England against us." Underhill also wrote a letter to minister John Cotton in Boston, "full of high and threatening words against us" but in another letter to

³⁸ Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 28; Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:251, 301–2, 329; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 352–58. The woman in question, Mrs. Faber, apparently returned to England with her husband in 1639. Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 264n61. For another record of Underhill's confession before the church, see James F. Cooper Jr., "The Confession and Trial of Richard Wayte, Boston, 1640," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 321–22. Underhill's banishment was lifted in June 1641. See also Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 1:329.

³⁹ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 269, 284–86; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 353–54.

Winthrop he asked that the past be put behind them and “disavowing all purpose of revenge.”⁴⁰ Why he would present two different faces to men who were nearly certain to share these letters with each other is a mystery.

In the meantime, however, Underhill had been elected to replace Burdett as governor of the Pascataqua settlement. Underhill then ousted Burdett from the pulpit in favor of Hanserd Knollys, a minister who came to Pascataqua with Underhill and whom Burdett had forbidden to preach when he arrived, and renamed the settlement Dover.⁴¹ About this same time, it was discovered that Burdett had been in correspondence with the puritans’ mortal enemy, Archbishop Laud, since the time of his residence at Salem. Winthrop downplayed any involvement he may have had in intercepting Burdett’s letters. In May 1639, someone in Dover, “having opportunity to go into Mr. Burdett his study,” found a letter Burdett had written to the archbishops the previous autumn and sent it to Winthrop. Then letters arrived for Burdett from the archbishops and Lords Commissioners, and Winthrop insisted that “some moved the governor to open them; but himself and others of the council thought it not safe to meddle with them.” These letters were “by some strange Providence” intercepted and “both letters, or their contents” were shown to Governor Winthrop.⁴² In these machinations, Winthrop, his allies, and his enemies were taking advantage of a preferred strategy of waging political war against their opponents by using their own words against them. Writing and intercepting letters allowed men to reframe controversies to their own advantage by harnessing the understanding of letters as revelations of

⁴⁰ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 274.

⁴¹ Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 318–19; Moody, “Thomas Gorges,” 16; Scales, *History of Dover, New Hampshire*, 1:109.

⁴² Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 263; Sawyer, “Agamenticus,” 143n3.

truth as well as the correspondence networks that had long sustained godly communities.⁴³

Whether because of the political scandal of the letters or because of Underhill's rule, Burdett soon left for Agamenticus (now York, Maine), a plantation under the authority of Sir Ferdinando Gorges rather than the Bay Colony patent.⁴⁴

Winthrop may not have liked Burdett but he was not fond of his replacement either. Winthrop described Hanserd Knollys as "a weak minister, lately come out of England, and rejected by us for holding some of Mrs. Hutchinson's opinions" and his church as a collection of "some few loose men."⁴⁵ Knollys had been turned away by the Bay Colony leadership because of suspicions that he was in sympathy with the Antinomians, a suspicion that is lent credence both by his alliance with Underhill and by his subsequent prominence as a Particular Baptist in his later life in England.⁴⁶ The opinion of Knollys among Massachusetts's men was apparently not much better than their opinion of either Burdett or Underhill. Hubbard reported with seeming glee that one English puritan cleric had nicknamed him, "with a little variation of the letters of his name, Absurdo Knowless."⁴⁷ Hanserd Knollys had arrived in Boston in summer 1639 "in the company of our familistical opinionists" and forbidden to settle there when he was "found inclining that way." He moved on to Pascataqua, possibly at Underhill's invitation, but Burdett did not allow him to preach. After Burdett left for Agamenticus, Knollys "gathered some of the best minded into a church body, and became their pastor." It was later discovered

⁴³ Lindsay O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), chap. 3 and 4; Round, *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, 62.

⁴⁴ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 356.

⁴⁵ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 284–86.

⁴⁶ Hanserd Knollys, *The Life and Death of That Old Disciple of Jesus Christ, and Eminent Minister of the Gospel, Mr. Hanserd Knollys, Who Dyed In the Ninety Third Year of His Age* (London: John Harris, 1692); David Cressy, "Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England," *The Journal of Library History* (1974–1987) 21 (1986): 95; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 357–58.

⁴⁷ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 356–57.

that Knollys had written a letter to London when he first arrived in New England that “bitterly inveighed against us, both against our magistrates and churches, and against all the people in general.” Knollys had been called to account by Governor Winthrop and “was deeply humbled for it,” eventually coming back to Boston to “give satisfaction.” He made a “free and full confession” in public on a lecture day and also wrote a letter “to the same effect” to his friends in England.⁴⁸

Underhill was also called to account for his actions against the Massachusetts colony. The General Court sent a letter to Dover “and sent them a copy of his letters, (wherein he professeth himself to be an instrument ordained of God for our ruin,) to know, whether it were with their privity and consent, that he sent us such a defiance...and whether they would maintain him in such practices against us.” The people of Dover and of Strawberry Bank “showed their indignation against him for his insolences, and their readiness to join in any fair course for our satisfaction; only they desired us to have some compassion of him, and not to send any forces against him.” The loss of support demoralized Underhill and “he wrote letters of retraction to divers,” but also sent Massachusetts’s Deputy Governor copies of Winthrop’s letters, “supposing that something would appear in them either to extenuate his fault, or to lay blame upon the governor; but he failed in both, for the governor was able to make good what he had written.”⁴⁹

While Underhill was battling Winthrop, Burdett had moved on to Agamenticus and soon “let loose the reins to his lust, so as he was grown very notorious for his pride and adultery.”⁵⁰ In September 1640, Burdett was called before the court at Saco to answer multiple charges of

⁴⁸ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 318–19.

⁴⁹ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 284–86.

⁵⁰ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 361.

adultery. The court called Burdett a “man of ill name and fame, infamous for incontinency.”⁵¹ They echoed John Winthrop’s opinion that women were at the heart of the Antinomian crisis because they were more susceptible to wicked heresies, and that they were then able to convert their husbands to these opinions, in an indictment that claimed Burdett had been “a publisher and broacher of divers dangerous speeches, the better to seduce the weak sex of women to his incontinent practices.”⁵²

Multiple cases involving George Burdett occupied the Maine courts in September 1640. Burdett successfully sued Elizabeth Brady and Daniel Knight for slander after they spread rumors about his behavior. He claimed Brady had “lewdly and maliciously published many reproachful words against” him, including an accusation that he “was taken upon a bed with Puddington’s wife” and that she saw “passages of uncleanness” between Burdett and her own mother. Knight had said that Burdett “had the use of the body of James Wall his wife many times” and that he “was with her in a private place all the night at Pascataqua.” Knight, who was Burdett’s servant, also said that Burdett “used to send him out of doors at such time as Puddington’s wife resorted to his house, and that his bed was usually tumbled.” Brady and Knight were not the only people talking about Burdett’s indiscretions. Knight told the court that “divers others have likewise deposed the like things.” The jury, however, found in Burdett’s favor in both cases.⁵³ They had apparently not yet heard witnesses in the cases that would soon be before them alleging that he had done the very things that were claimed.

⁵¹ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 221, 361.

⁵² Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 205–6; *Province and Court Records of Maine*, vol. 1 (Portland: Maine Historical Society, 1928), 74.

⁵³ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:70–71.

Later in the same court session, two women faced charges stemming from their relationships with Burdett. Mary Puddington was indicted “for often frequenting the house and company of Mr. George Burdett minister of Agamenticus aforesaid privately in his bed chamber and else where in a very suspicious manner,” despite having been “forewarned thereof by her said husband and the constable of said plantation with divers others.” She was also indicted “for abusing her said husband to the great disturbance and scandal of the said plantation.” The court sentenced Mary to make a public confession in the court and again at Agamenticus, and they provided the text of the confession for her. She was to acknowledge that she had “dishonored God, the place where I live, and wronged my husband by my disobedience and light carriage,” to “promise amendment of life and manners henceforth,” and to “ask her husband forgiveness on her knees.” Ruth Gouch was found guilty of adultery with Burdett and she was sentenced to “stand in a white sheet publicly, in the congregation at Agamenticus, two several Sabbath days, and likewise one day at this General Court” after she recovered from the birth to the child she was carrying.”⁵⁴ Whether George Burdett was named as the father of the child is not mentioned, but that was likely their conclusion, since adultery accusations so often followed from a pregnancy.

Despite Burdett having been granted damages in his slander cases, he was found guilty of the crimes alleged against him. He was fined ten pounds for being a “man of ill name and fame, infamous for incontineny, a publisher and broacher of divers dangerous speeches the better to seduce that weak sex of women to his incontinent practices,” and another ten pounds for “entertaining Mary the wife of George Puddington in his house.”⁵⁵ He was fined a further five

⁵⁴ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:73–75.

⁵⁵ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:75.

pounds for being a “turbulent breaker of the peace” and another twenty pounds for “deflowering Ruth the wife of John Gouch.”⁵⁶ Burdett refused to pay his fines and appealed to England for support, but Gorges seized some of his cattle as payment. By early 1641, Thomas Gorges reported to John Winthrop that Burdett was at Pemaquid (now Bristol, Maine), and was planning to leave for England. Gorges reported that he was “grown to that height of sin that it is to be feared he is given over” and spent his time “drinking, dancing, singing scurrilous songs, and for his companions he selects the wretchedest people of the country.”⁵⁷ Burdett eventually found himself imprisoned in England after serving as a chaplain in the Royalist army during the Civil Wars.⁵⁸

Back in Dover, Underhill and Knollys faced a new challenge to their authority with the arrival of Thomas Larkham in 1640. Larkham claimed to have been persecuted by the High Commission and Star Chamber in England, but no records verify this, and he was evidently only deprived of his pulpit for “neglect by absence” after he had departed for New England.⁵⁹ Larkham was installed as Knollys’s assistant but the two disagreed on a range of issues including the performance of the sacraments and requirements for church membership, particularly with regard to baptism. Knollys, true to his reputation as an Antinomian, was more restrictive on all counts than Larkham, who held an expansive view of membership and participation in the

⁵⁶ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:74.

⁵⁷ Thomas Gorges to John Winthrop, Agamenticus 23 12m 1640[41], *Winthrop Papers*, 1944, 4:322–23.

⁵⁸ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 361; Jeremy Belknap, *The History of New Hampshire*, vol. 1 (Dover: S.C. Stevens and Ela & Wadleigh, 1831), 1:19; Moody, “Thomas Gorges,” 16; Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 318; Charles Edward Banks, *History of York, Maine, Successively Known as Bristol (1632), Agamenticus (1641), Gorgeana (1642), and York (1652), in Three Volumes*, Reprint, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1931), 119. Banks claimed that Burdett was given a preferment in Ireland after the Restoration and died in old age in 1671. Banks, 2:2:119.

⁵⁹ Susan Hardman Moore, “Larkham, Thomas (1602–1669),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16070.

sacraments (and, according to one report, sometimes used the Book of Common Prayer).⁶⁰

Larkham's adherents outnumbered those who stayed loyal to Knollys and Larkham soon usurped his place, excommunicating Knollys and installing himself as minister.⁶¹ Upholders of the newly established and tenuous orthodoxy in Massachusetts Bay now found themselves taking the side of Knollys, a probable Antinomian who they had forced out of the colony not long before. John Winthrop reported that Larkham was "a man not savoring the right way of church discipline, but being a man of good parts and wealthy" and so he was able to convince the people to support him over Knollys. Larkham then, according to Winthrop, "received into the church all that offered themselves, though men notoriously scandalous and ignorant, so they would promise amendment, and fell into contention with the people, and would take upon him to rule all, even the magistrates (such as they were)." The church soon divided into factions supporting one or the other of these ministers, "so as there soon grew sharp contention between him and Mr. Knollys, to whom the more religious still adhered, whereupon they were divided into two churches."⁶²

The controversy devolved into notorious physical confrontations between the ministers and between their rival factions. Knollys responded to his excommunication by excommunicating Larkham, who then "laid violent hands upon Mr. Knollys." There were multiple physical confrontations and a "series of civil suits, avowed quarrels and ineffectual mediations, occurred between the factions," which famously culminated in a pitched confrontation between the two blocs.⁶³ Larkham and his followers marched toward Underhill's

⁶⁰ Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 319.

⁶¹ Cressy, "Books as Totems," 95.

⁶² Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 348–49.

⁶³ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 362; Bouton, *Records of Province of New Hampshire*, 1:122; Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 319.

house to confront him and Knollys. Knollys armed himself with a pistol and gathered his own supporters, including one “carrying a bible upon a staff for an ensign,” and they marched toward Larkham’s group. Larkham then sent word to the governor of nearby Strawberry Bank, who dispatched an army to guard the house. The company kept guard while a court was called. Underhill’s group was convicted on the charge of starting a riot and they were fined or forced to leave the plantation. Winthrop claimed that action was so swiftly and harshly taken against Underhill because he had made overtures to Massachusetts about bringing Dover back under the auspices of the Bay Colony.⁶⁴

A tumble of accusations against both Larkham and Knollys became public at the end of the crisis. A council was sent by the General Court to sort out the mess, and they “at the length brought matters to a peaceable end.” In the course of the conference, however, testimony was evidently offered that Knollys was not so strict in his personal discipline as he was in the church. Hubbard reported that “Mr. Knollys was discovered to be tardy in the same guilt with others of the Antinomian sect, viz. to have solicited the chastity of two maids, his servants, and to have used wanton dalliance with them.”⁶⁵ The accusations do not seem to have followed him back to England, where he returned after being dismissed from the Dover church. He soon became a leader of the Baptist cause and “died with the reputation of an eminent minister” in September 1691.⁶⁶ Larkham had indicated that he would remain in Dover but departed for England after he,

⁶⁴ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 348–49; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 362–63. One of the most notorious exposés of early New England had nothing to say about the sexual accusations against Larkham and Knollys. Thomas Lechford dwelled at length on the story of the “riot” at Pascataqua but made no mention of the scandals, probably because the accusations had not yet come to light when his pamphlet was sent to press. Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 44.

⁶⁵ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 363.

⁶⁶ Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England, Comprising Not Only Religious, But Also Moral, and Other Relations.*, vol. 1 (Boston: Congregational Library Association, 1855), 453; Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 319.

too, was accused of sexual transgressions. Winthrop's record of the events indicates that the people of Dover wanted to retain Larkham as their minister but he snuck out of the colony and shortly after his departure "a widow which kept in his house, being a very handsome woman, and about fifty years of age, proved to be with child, and being examined, at first refused to confess the father, but in the end she laid it to Mr. Larkham."⁶⁷ Larkham had a politically tumultuous career in England, though no further sexual accusations seem to have been made, and he died there in 1669.⁶⁸

Revelations about Burdett, Knollys, and Larkham were inextricably intertwined with their relationships to the discredited Antinomian faction in Massachusetts Bay. Interpretations of their activities depended heavily, then and in later centuries, on authors' opinions about the Antinomian crisis. There were fears among some in Massachusetts that the northern settlements might become a "refuge for runaways" from the Bay colony.⁶⁹ The supposed wildness of the northern plantations and the supposed libertinism of Antinomians made the indiscretions of Burdett, Knollys, and Larkham seem almost inevitable. Men like Winthrop were already inclined to believe the worst about their opponents, particularly when they aligned themselves with notorious men like Underhill. Accusations needed less confirmation when circumstances themselves lent credence to rumor. Winthrop wrote that Burdett was undone when Thomas Gorge made clear that he wanted to "reform things" and "the neighbors ... produced such foul matters against him, as he was laid hold on, and bound to appear at their court at Saco." Burdett's time in the Cavalier or Royalist army seems to have been proof to Winthrop that his

⁶⁷ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 421. See also Moore, "Larkham, Thomas (1602–1669)"; Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 364.

⁶⁸ Lawrence, *New Hampshire Churches*, 319; Moore, "Larkham, Thomas (1602–1669)."

⁶⁹ *Winthrop Papers*, 1944, 4:323–24.

judgment of Burdett was correct.⁷⁰ Winthrop noted that Knollys's and Underhill's adulterous behavior was of a piece with their libertine religious views; "it is very observable how God gave up these two, and some others who had held with Mrs. Hutchinson...to fall into these unclean courses, whereby themselves and their erroneous opinions were laid open to the world."⁷¹ Lechford, who was often critical of the Massachusetts church, wrote that Larkham and Knollys "fell out about baptizing children, receiving members, burial of the dead" rather than over a power grab.⁷² Hubbard wrote after the fear and chaos of the Antinomian moment had subsided, but he was still careful to describe the ministers of Pascataqua in terms of their adherence to its leaders and tenets. He reveled in Knollys's apparent hypocrisy, since the transgression "was first discovered the same night after he had been exhorting the people, by reason and Scripture, to proceed against Captain Underhill for adultery." Knollys was, according to Hubbard, "tardy in the same guilt with others of the Antinomian sect." Larkham fled, Hubbard thought, because "every heart knows best its own grief and guilt" and he knew it was the only way to escape "shame of a scandalous evil." Larkham's loose morals were consistent with his loose view of church discipline and his willingness to "receiv[e] into the church all that offered themselves, though never so notoriously scandalous and ignorant." Taken together, the scandals that befell the ministers of Pascataqua were proof that "God doth many times justly give up those, that cry down any evidence by sanctification, to such filthy ways, that they should find no sanctification in themselves, to evidence a justified estate by."⁷³

⁷⁰ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 330.

⁷¹ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 350.

⁷² Lechford, *Plain Dealing*, 44.

⁷³ Hubbard, *General History of New England*, 363–64.

The details of Burdett's crimes are known because they were documented in court cases in Saco. The court hinted that there were other women, other crimes, in their assertion that he was "infamous for incontinency" but the crimes with which he was charged seem to have been separate from the strife at Pascataqua despite having been invoked as retrospective evidence against him. The women he seduced were not treated as victims and were subjected to shaming punishments even though the court explicitly judged him to be a master manipulator. The accusations against Knollys and Larkham were recounted almost as afterthoughts. Servant women who had been seduced or assaulted by these men have no identities in the narratives. Their names and the circumstances through which their stories became public knowledge are absent. There is no indication of who they were or what happened to them afterward. The women were symbols of disorder, acted upon rather than actors in their own right, and their words omitted and forgotten. In the absence of court records that recorded details of accusations and crimes, cases like Larkham's and Knollys's could easily be dismissed as politically motivated rumor by those who later sought to remember the stories in a different light.

The use of letters to circulate information and shape opinions in these cases shows how the boundaries were continually blurred between oral and written communication, and between gossip and news. Rumors became knowledge and insinuations were made reliable not only by their translation into the written word but also because they were penned by men with power and good reputation. Their interests were not in keeping women safe from predatory ministers, but rather in keeping the colony safe from encroaching religious dissidents and political upheaval. Women's words became tools of political maneuvering instead of sources of moral policing or surveillance. Their talk mattered, but not in ways they may have intended.

**“what rumors detracting spirits raise up”⁷⁴
The Tumultuous Career of Stephen Bachiler**

Stephen Bachiler’s ministerial sojourn in New England spanned the entire period of the Pascataqua controversies, which is all the more remarkable because he was already seventy years old when he arrived in America in 1632. Like those in Pascataqua, his time in New England was also marked by suspicions of familism or Antinomian sympathies. Bachiler was a veteran of the religious upheavals in old England and had been deprived of his pulpit in 1605, “excommunicated among the earliest of the nonconformists,” after holding a vicarage in Hampshire for twenty years.⁷⁵ He possibly spent time among the exiles in Holland before arriving in Lynn (Saugus), Massachusetts, in June 1632 to settle with his daughter Theodate and son-in-law Christopher Hussey, and he remained there for several years.⁷⁶ Bachiler was among the investors in the ill-fated Company of the Plough, which had intended to start their own settlement on land granted by Ferdinando Gorges but lost everything due to the “false dealing of those entrusted by us with the Plough’s ship and our goods therein.” The Company seems to have been not only a business but also a religious community, and John Winthrop evidently believed that the Company, and Bachiler, held familist opinions. Bachiler began holding religious services among his compatriots in Lynn without undergoing the usual formalities of

⁷⁴ “Stephen Bachiler to John Winthrop, 3 May 1647,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Fourth Series, vol. 7 (Boston: The Society, 1865), 109.

⁷⁵ Charles E. Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 46 (1892): 62.

⁷⁶ Dow, *History of Hampton*, 344. On history of the Plough company, see Letters of Stephen Bachiler, in *Coll. MHS*, 7:88–98. Biographical information about Bachiler can be found in Victor C. Sanborn, *Stephen Bachiler: An Unforgiven Puritan* (Concord, NH: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1917); Alonzo Lewis, *The History of Lynn: Including Nahant*, second (Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson, 1844); Dow, *History of Hampton*; Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler.”

ordination or obtaining permission to form a church but after just four months, Bachiler was suspected of “having independent ideas” and was forbidden to preach for several months.⁷⁷

No records survive to document the next two years of Bachiler’s career, but in March 1635 a council of ministers met at Lynn to address issues arising because “divers of the brethren of that church not liking the proceedings of the pastor” had withdrawn from the church. This time a council of elders eventually reconciled the two factions, but this was not the end of the church’s contentions.⁷⁸ Bachiler found himself before the magistrates in January 1636, requesting dismissal for himself and his “first members” to form a separate church because of “contention growing between him, and the greatest part of his church.” This request was granted, on the assumption that Bachiler and his followers would leave Lynn. Bachiler did not leave, however, and sought to form a rival church within the same community, threatening the Lynn church’s chances of securing a new minister. Magistrates responded to complaints from Lynn by telling Bachiler that he was forbidden to preach or to form a new church until the issues were settled. He refused to comply and eventually was brought to court by a marshal and told he must leave town within three months.⁷⁹

Bachiler’s biographers differ on the course of his travels after leaving Lynn, but by the winter of 1637/8 he was attempting to start a settlement at Yarmouth after reportedly travelling there on foot at age seventy-six with some of his family and friends.⁸⁰ That settlement did not last and they were given permission to settle instead at Hampton, which they did in October 1638. More settlers began to arrive and the following spring Timothy Dalton was ordained as

⁷⁷ Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 78–79; Dow, *History of Hampton*, 344.

⁷⁸ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 143; Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 87.

⁷⁹ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 164.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 94.

teacher in the church for which Bachiler was pastor. As in the Pascataqua settlement, the ministers vehemently disagreed and contention overtook the town, but no records remain to reveal the exact source of their disagreement.⁸¹ In fact, the record on Bachiler is silent until 1641, when John Winthrop recorded that he, like so many ministers before him, was accused of sexual impropriety. In November of that year, Winthrop reported that Bachiler, “being about 80 years of age, and having a lusty comely woman to his wife, did solicit the chastity of his neighbor’s wife, who acquainted her husband therewith.” Bachiler denied the accusations, “as he had told the woman he would do, and complained to the magistrates against the woman and her husband for slandering him.” Charges of slander indicate that the accusations were being discussed in the town in a way that Bachiler felt was damaging to his reputation. He initially denied the charges when confronted in the church but soon admitted “that he did intend to have defiled her, if she would have consented.” The church included him in the Lord’s Supper but afterward, “finding how scandalous it was,” they consulted with elders from other churches and then “cast him out.” He continued to alternately show remorse and make excuses for his behavior, “casting blame upon others, especially his fellow elder Mr. Dalton.”⁸²

The following spring, John Cotton wrote to Bachiler. Cotton seems to have been convinced of Bachiler’s guilt and advised him to look “to those corruptions in your own heart (which even old disciples are still subject to) whereby you have provoked the Lord both to leave you to secret ebullitions of lust, and to bring secret sins to light in the sight of this sun.” Cotton’s letter indicates that Bachiler had attempted to bring some kind of charges against Dalton, but “had I lived near you, I should have dissuaded you from prosecuting an offence against your

⁸¹ Dow, *History of Hampton*, 346; Sargent Bush Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 357.

⁸² Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 368–69.

teacher, till your own offence had been wholly removed.” Cotton advised that protesting his innocence was not necessary to be restored to the church, if he would only “acknowledge you gave them by your sin just occasion of offence, and grief, and the more in regard of the eminency of your person and calling.” The important thing, according to Cotton, was that his confession be “open, and full and contrite, as might give full and clear testimony of your repentance at that time.” He expressed hope that Bachiler would be either restored or allowed to pursue a calling from another church but advised that he should not seek a new pulpit until he had completely dealt with the controversy in the Hampton church. He also advised that the Boston church could not intervene or offer advice unless and until specifically asked by the Hampton church, lest they be “busybodies.”⁸³ The line between gossip and news was blurry, but Cotton wanted to stay on the right side of it by making sure they did not meddle in other churches’ affairs unless invited.

After two years “and much agitation had been about the matter,” the church finally sought the opinions of magistrates and elders and the subsequent council removed Bachiler’s excommunication but forbade him to return to the pulpit.⁸⁴ Bachiler wrote to Winthrop, Cotton, and John Wilson protesting his innocence and asking advice about the prospect of resettling in the pulpit at Casco. Bachiler continued to place the blame for the scandal firmly on Dalton, who he said “hath done all and been the cause of all the dishonor that hath accrued to God, shame to my self, and grief to all God’s people, by his irregular proceedings, and abuse of the power of the church in his hand.” Dalton was emboldened to proffer these charges because of the support of the church, the “major part cleaving to him” because they were “his countrymen and acquaintance in old England,” which Bachiler said prevented him from having a fair hearing.

⁸³ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 358–59.

⁸⁴ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 368–69; Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 94.

Bachiler hoped that neighboring elders would be able to detect the unfairness of the proceedings, which “would prove the foulest matter (both for the cause alleged, of that excommunication and the impulsive cause (even wroth and revenge) and also the manner of his proceeding thorough out to the very end.”⁸⁵

Bachiler eventually received a call from Exeter but was forbidden from accepting the call by the General Court, which in May 1644 ordered that the town “defer the gathering of any church” because Exeter too was torn by “divisions and contentions.”⁸⁶ By July, the case was once again brought to the attention of the General Court, who recorded that “the contentions in Hampton were grown to a great height, the whole town was divided into two factions.” Numerous meetings had led to a temporary reconciliation, they recalled, but conflict “brake out presently again, each side being apt to take fire upon any provocation.” In the meantime, Bachiler’s faction in Exeter “appointed a day of humiliation to gather a new church, and call Mr. Bachiler” and the court intervened to stop it. They found that “Mr. Bachiler had been in three places before, and through this means, as was supposed, the churches fell to such divisions, as no peace could be till he was removed.”⁸⁷ The aging minister brought conflict and discord wherever he went.

The call to Exeter thus prevented, Bachiler next moved to Strawberry Bank (Portsmouth) by 1647 and remained there for about three years.⁸⁸ Despite his now advanced age of near ninety years old, Bachiler was not done facing sexual scandals. He had been left a widower when his wife Helena died and his neighbors at Strawberry Bank provided a housekeeper, “an honest

⁸⁵ Bush, *Correspondence of John Cotton*, 376–78. This letter is also printed in *Coll. MHS*, 7:100–105.

⁸⁶ Dow, *History of Hampton*, 347–48; Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company*, 1853, 2:67–68; Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 94.

⁸⁷ Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 519–20.

⁸⁸ Dow, *History of Hampton*, 348; Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 94.

neighbor (a widow) to have some eye and care towards my family, for washing, baking, and other such common services.” Stories began to circulate about his relationship with the housekeeper and Bachiler remarked to John Winthrop that “it is a world of woes to think what rumors detracting spirits raise up, that I am married to her, or certainly shall be; and cast on her such aspersions without ground or proof.”⁸⁹ Despite his claims that these were mere gossip, he did in fact marry his housekeeper, Mary, in 1650 without first publishing the banns.⁹⁰ One of Bachiler’s biographers delicately described the union as “in every way unfortunate.”⁹¹ It was certainly not a happy marriage and before the first year was out both Stephen and Mary Bachiler apparently petitioned for divorce, but the court ordered them to “live together as man and wife” and required them to pay a bond, adding that if they refused they would be taken to Boston by the marshal and held until the next Quarter Court.⁹²

The reason for their mutual divorce petitions may be that in October 1650, Mary Bachiler was presented to the General Court at Gorgeana (now York, Maine) for “vehement suspicion of incontinency” along with her accused lover, George Rodgers. The two were cited for “living in one house together and lying in one room.” The court sentenced them “to be separated before the next court or to pay 40s.”⁹³ They were convicted of adultery at the next court; Rodgers was sentenced to flogging and Mary was to be both whipped and branded with the letter “A,” possibly on her cheek, a punishment unique in colonial Maine and one that has led at least one historian to suspect this story was the inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ *Coll. MHS*, 7:109.

⁹⁰ Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 94–95.

⁹¹ Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 346.

⁹² Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 95.

⁹³ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:146.

⁹⁴ *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 1:164; Newberry, “Red-Hot A and a Lusting Divine.”

Though the sexual immorality was Mary's rather than Stephen's, he was now a cuckold and sometime after her conviction Bachiler returned to England alone.⁹⁵ In October 1656, Mary Bachiler petitioned the court for a divorce in his absence because she claimed to have been "credibly informed" that her husband had remarried in England without first obtaining a divorce from her. A divorce would allow her to marry again, something she said was necessary to prevent her from relying on charity to support herself and two ill children. She was "loth" to rely on charity, "as is well known to all, or most part of her neighbors." Despite her reputation as an adulteress, and despite the permanent mark of that crime on her face, Mary Bachiler not only believed she could find a new husband but also relied on her reputation among her neighbors as part of her divorce petition.⁹⁶ Both the General Court and the House of Deputies referred her petition to the county court at York.⁹⁷ No records show whether her request was granted or whether she succeeded in remarrying and no record has been located to prove or disprove Mary's claim that Stephen Bachiler in fact bigamously remarried in England, but tradition claims he died there in 1660, making him 100 years of age.⁹⁸

Stephen Bachiler's long life included allegations of attempted adultery and bigamy, as well as revelations that he was a cuckold. Though he returned to England in something like secrecy or shame, he has been credited by local historians and genealogists as the founder of Hampton and attempting to clear Bachiler's name became something of a cottage industry among nineteenth-century antiquarians.⁹⁹ Those authors attempted to discredit Bachiler's wife,

⁹⁵ Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 95; Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 33; Dow, *History of Hampton*, 348; Batchelder, "Rev. Stephen Bachiler," 348.

⁹⁶ Massachusetts State Archives Collections, Vol. 9, Domestic Relations, 28; Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 96.

⁹⁷ Shurtleff, *Records of Governor and Company*, 3:418; 4, part 1:282.

⁹⁸ Lewis, *History of Lynn*, 96.

⁹⁹ Many genealogists and antiquarians saw Bachiler as a town founder or family patriarch. See, for example, V.C. Sanborn, "Rev. Stephen Bachiler," in *Batchelder, Batcheller Genealogy*, by Frederick Clifton Pierce

Mary, who they viewed as a “wicked woman” who “inveigled him into the marriage, in his extreme old age” and was “anxious to do her husband all the wrong in her power.” Her accusations of bigamy were “unsupported and discredited,” “utter falsehood,” and “worthless,” she was herself “disreputable” and “graceless.”¹⁰⁰ They impugned the local community, describing it as having a “reputation for impiety, lawlessness, [and] salaciousness” that contributed to Massachusetts elites’ willingness to believe charges like these and bolstered the Bay Colony’s efforts to bring the Maine settlements under their political authority.¹⁰¹ Winthrop’s story was dissected point by point to show that it was “utterly improbable” and the lack of records is cited as proof of Bachiler’s innocence, despite the loss of court and church records that would have contained any record of criminal or disciplinary proceedings against him.¹⁰² Some even discredited the very notion of the crimes; one author sneered that “no charge is so easily made, so readily believed without proof, and so difficult to disprove.” An accusation was enough to damage the character of someone who had no way to counter unprovable charges.¹⁰³ In the end, though, the arguments all came back to Bachiler’s own character. The charges must have been false, politically motivated slander, or John Winthrop’s titillating

(Chicago: By the Author, 1898), 95–98. See also the papers collected in the “Hampton History” section of the website for the Lane Memorial Library in Hampton, NH, which include Eleanor Campbell Schoen, “Our Fascinating Ancestor, Stephen Bachiler,” (May 22, 1999), <http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/biog/bachilerschoen.htm>; George Freeman Sanborn Jr., “Rev. Stephen Bachiler of Hampton: Some Additional Information,” *New Hampshire Genealogical Record* 8 (January 1991); F. B. Sanborn, “The Hard Case of the Founder of Old Hampton: Wrongs of Stephen Bachiler” (August 9, 1900), <http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/biog/bachilerhardcase.htm>; Philip Mason Marston, *The Reverend Stephen Bachiler: Saint or Sinner?* (Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New Hampshire, 1961). The exception is Alonzo Lewis, whose history of Lynn presents a more even-handed assessment. Lewis, *History of Lynn*.

¹⁰⁰ Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 34; Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 348–49; Dow, *History of Hampton*, 348.

¹⁰¹ Banks, *History of York*, 2:110; Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 247.

¹⁰² Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 246; Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 26–27, 35; Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 246.

¹⁰³ Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 248–49.

fantasy, since Bachiler was an “honored and respected” man of “gentleness,” “courtesy,” and “cultivation in excess of many of his contemporaries,” and on that basis alone “his memory may be said to have been cleared.”¹⁰⁴ Even if that were not so, the simple fact of his age was, for these writers, evidence against the charges. A man in his eighties could not possibly have acted this way.¹⁰⁵ Bachiler became, in these histories, a paean to nineteenth-century values, “a high-minded but unsuccessful patriarch, with the defects of his qualities, at variance with the narrow and doomed intent of the Bay oligarchs, spending his life in the vain search for religious freedom, and rebelling at the limitations and prescriptions which time was to show were impossible in a free and gradually enlightened democracy.”¹⁰⁶ Winthrop is the villain, Mary Bachiler the villainess, and the minister well-intentioned but politically persecuted.¹⁰⁷

Gossip was an explicit undercurrent in the accusations against Bachiler. When he attempted to “defile” a neighbor woman, the event became public in part because she told her husband. When confronted with his sin, however, Bachiler blamed not his own failing or the woman’s talk, however, but his assistant Timothy Dalton. Bachiler claimed he was being persecuted by Dalton not because he had attacked a married woman but because Dalton was trying to undermine his position. Bachiler later excused rumors about his relationship with his housekeeper as gossip up until he hastily married her. His later biographers similarly discounted the women’s words or cast aspersions on their characters. Women’s words were instrumental in shaping Bachiler’s career but their influence can hardly be detected in the narratives constructed by those who were motivated to cast him in the most flattering possible light.

¹⁰⁴ Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 26–27, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Batchelder, “Rev. Stephen Bachiler,” 246.

¹⁰⁶ Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 35–36.

¹⁰⁷ Sanborn, *Unforgiven Puritan*, 27.

“his son, morally, by imitation, as well as naturally, by generation”¹⁰⁸
John Cotton, Jr., and the Legacy of the Founders

Lyford, Burdett, Knollys, Larkham, and Bachiler all left New England, and all except Lyford returned to England. This trend would not hold for another minister who faced accusations later in the seventeenth century. The son of a prominent minister of the founding generation, born in America rather than England, he was able to rehabilitate his reputation and repeatedly find new pulpits in the aftermath of sexual scandals. John Cotton, Jr., was the son of a respected and famous first-generation minister who had weathered the Antinomian crisis and was probably one of the brightest prospects among the first American-born generation of New England ministers. He was the son of eminent Boston minister John Cotton and his second wife Sarah, who later married Richard Mather. The younger Cotton graduated from Harvard in 1657 and began preaching at Wethersfield two years later. He married in 1660 at the young age of just twenty years old, became a freeman in Connecticut, and remained in Wethersfield until 1663 but had not been formally ordained when he was forced to leave because of a scandal.¹⁰⁹

In March 1662, a council convened to hear allegations of misconduct by the young preacher. The accusations were wide reaching. Steven Scott claimed that Cotton “minds no lectures nothing but his wife and drinking.” Scott also claimed that Cotton had not accurately conveyed a woman’s statement to the church when it was read to the congregation, and that instead Cotton “left out or put in as he pleased,” an inappropriate use of ministerial authority. The council found him guilty of these charges. Scott made another charge, that “the judgment or curse of god would not remove from Wethersfield whilst Mr. Cotton abode there.” This was not

¹⁰⁸ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Charles William Sever, 1881), 496–508.

proved, the council said, and one wonders what kind of proof might have sufficed. The more serious charges, however, concerned several women from the church. The council determined that the first allegation, that he had gone “into Mrs. Chittendin’s chamber with Goodwife Wright pretending merely to see the furniture of the house,” was “a foolish curiosity and a matter of no good report” but advised him to keep better watch over himself. The council found there was insufficient evidence to prove the second allegation “concerning the more gross act mentioned in Goodwife Wright’s testimony.” Wright evidently testified that he offered some untoward language to Mrs. Wells, and while the council could not conclude that he necessarily “spake on purpose to vex Mrs. Wells” they did judge “his expressions herein to be sinful, rash, unpeaceable, especially considering his place and charge.” Cotton had responded to charges that he had behaved immorally by saying that Mrs. Wells was “guilty of licentious whorish practices” and that her husband had given false testimony, and the council found this to be “a charge of a very high defaming nature rashly spoken and in no way proved by him against her.” He had publicly disputed her claim to have “strove with him,” but he “doth before us utterly renounce the same” and for the council this was satisfaction enough. These accusations against Cotton were part of a larger disorder at Wethersfield, as in so many other communities the result of disagreements between two ministers. The council was “deeply sensible of the chastising hand of the Lord not only upon the particular place in the which the persons above concerned lives but upon the whole country by reason of the continued often renewed and greatly humbling differences that have arose at Wethersfield” and therefore asked the whole community to search themselves for reasons for God’s displeasure.” For his part, Cotton thought the charges were retaliation for his handling of a will.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 43–45.

A year later Cotton remained unreconciled to the church and he received a letter from John Davenport which suggests that the older minister was convinced of Cotton's guilt. He politely thanked Cotton for "your kind acceptance of my loving freeness in expressing my deep sense of your sinful miscarriages," which suggests that his words had perhaps been less than loving. In a previous conversation Davenport had addressed "such matters as were not fit to be committed to writing, which might fall into other hands, to the blemishing of your name, which I desired to preserve unspotted." Davenport evoked Cotton's lineage, lamenting that he had hoped "that as you bear both your fathers names, so you might hold forth the virtues of Christ, in the spirit and conversation, which eminently shined in him." Like the council, Davenport advised him that his reputation could be saved and "that scandal might be removed" if "the Lord convince you powerfully of your former sins, and humble you effectually for them to Justify wisdoms Counsels by your holding forth publicly your unfeigned repentance." Davenport asked for a copy of the confession Cotton had offered in public, which was "reported to be slight, and unsatisfying," and also asked him to provide more details of the case so that Davenport could offer "further advice." But Cotton had not sent those things, "whereby I am disadvantaged from giving you that help."¹¹¹

Cotton's troubles were clearly not over, and he was also facing disciplinary action in Boston's First Church where he was still a member. A year after Davenport's letter, Cotton wrote to John Winthrop, Jr., to ask for his help in navigating the Boston church's proceedings. By this time Cotton admitted his guilt, noting to Winthrop in dramatic fashion that "you are not a stranger to my dreadful fall, how greatly I have dishonored the glorious name of God that hath been called upon me, how much I have blemished the gospel of Jesus Christ, how sadly I have

¹¹¹ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 46–48.

wounded mine own soul and saddened the hearts of the righteous whom God would not have made sad.” He declared himself ready to “take shame to myself for the vileness of my heart and life.” He had been summoned to come before the church and demonstrate repentance, but he had also heard from “one who spake with those elders” that they would be more likely to accept his confession if “the hearts of people at Connecticut (I suppose they meant of the principal) were charitably satisfied with what I manifested to them there.” Cotton knew they would question him about “what satisfaction I had given in the place where my offence was committed.” He asked Winthrop to “confer with these or some of them as you have any occasion, with what speed you can, or any others whom you shall Judge meet to acquaint with the matter,” but he also asked that Winthrop not share this letter so that the queries would seem to be coming from him rather than Cotton.¹¹²

The Boston church proceeded with Cotton’s excommunication in May 1664 and provided a more succinct and pointed description of the charges against him than the convoluted report of the Wethersfield council. The reason for his excommunication, they said, was his “lascivious unclean practices with three women and his horrid lying to hide his sin.” One month later, he was accepted back into fellowship with them “upon his penitential acknowledgment openly confessing his sins.”¹¹³ Later that year Cotton wrote again to John Winthrop Jr., and this letter shows that the Boston church may not have been fully satisfied despite their willingness to reinstate him. Cotton said that “two of the persons principally concerned in this matter” had been to Guilford, where he was now residing. He had “immediately attended the tendering of satisfaction to them” and “the woman declared her self to be fully satisfied” but the man added a

¹¹² McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 50.

¹¹³ Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 60–61.

condition that Cotton must reveal any letters he had written to members of the congregation. Cotton said he was “principally engaged to endeavor the satisfaction of these above mentioned, for some reasons not fit to be written.” Winthrop had himself recently been in Wethersfield, evidently to inquire about the state of their relation to Cotton. The information he gathered there had made its way to Cotton by a Mr. Stone, and based on the words of at least one Wethersfield resident Cotton was “still more and more inclinable to believe, that everyone concerned will not manifest actual satisfaction.” But Cotton knew that full satisfaction was not needed at the Boston church, who only wanted proof that he had “regularly tendered my acknowledgements to them.” He had done this, and hoped that it would settle matters, “for I am informed by letters lately received from the Bay, that there is a considerable sum amongst my friends there, privately collected and intended for me, but it will not be sent to me till they hear what I have done for the satisfaction of offended persons at Connecticut.”¹¹⁴

Gossip about the continuing scandal was clearly making its way to Cotton and he expressed a defiance at odds with his claim to be working for resolution. He told Winthrop that if anyone said he needed to come there to satisfy them in person, “let it be dashed, and their expectations of any such thing, for I have some special reasons within my self, that do wholly take off my mind from any inclination to come up as yet.” He also reported having heard from Wethersfield that some were waiting for him to visit there so that they could “[vent] of the old prejudices of spirit against me” and so he worried that doing so would “prove greatly to my damage.” He urged Winthrop, “If you should have any opportunity to speak with those, to whom I spake at this town,” to assure them that satisfaction had been made.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 53.

¹¹⁵ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 53.

Another letter from Cotton to Winthrop in November 1664 lamented that they had not been able to speak in person. Cotton told him that he had “met with Mr. Allyn here, and have informed him how the case stands, as far as I know of it; and he is fully of the mind, that there would be no danger, but much advantage by reading of that letter to the congregation publicly.” Mr. Wells was evidently the holdout, refusing to be satisfied by Cotton’s expressions of contrition, and Cotton worried that there were others of the same opinion. Cotton again urged Winthrop to “forward the reading of that letter, if it be possible, the next Sabbath” so that the church would know he had offered satisfaction to the church at Wethersfield; “I cannot go to Boston,” he noted, “till that be done, without apparent hazard from the church there.” After the letters were read, he asked that John Allin send them back to him, along with Winthrop’s “testimonies that Mr. M: and [...] and their wives are fully satisfied, and that acknowledgments were read in public [and] communicated in private, and then I leave it with Boston to judge.”¹¹⁶

Surviving records do not indicate how or whether this controversy was resolved to Boston’s satisfaction, but about this time Cotton moved to Martha’s Vineyard and served as both minister to the English settlers and missionary to the Indians there. He remained for almost two years until a disagreement with the proprietor, Thomas Mayhew, led to his relocation to Plymouth.¹¹⁷ Cotton was called to Plymouth in September 1666 and initially declined, but then accepted when they renewed their call in late 1667.¹¹⁸ The church had had bad luck with their ministry since Lyford left, so despite their provenance as the first English settlement in New England, this was probably not a prestigious post but it was closer to the centers of power than Martha’s Vineyard had been. Cotton was ordained by the Plymouth church in 1669 and spent

¹¹⁶ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 54.

¹¹⁷ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 21, 59.

¹¹⁸ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 22; Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 22:143.

the nearly thirty years as their minister, apparently exercising enthusiastic reform and imposing congregational order in a town that had been without any real spiritual leadership for decades.¹¹⁹ He performed regular catechisms, sought out absent and relocated members to formalize their dismissals, dramatically increased their membership, began the practice of covenant renewals, held special meetings for household heads, and reformed their practice of psalm-singing. He also spent some weekdays providing instruction and services for nearby Christian Indians. One might almost think this sustained flurry of activity had rendered his previous transgressions forgotten, but controversy once again enveloped him in the mid-1690s. Disagreement over a member becoming an elder in another church led to a belief that Cotton was interfering in the laity's affairs and overstepping his role as minister of a gathered church. Other issues may have contributed to the discord, causing the development of in "an anti-Cotton faction of unknown size but significant influence eager to see Cotton gone."¹²⁰

In October 1697, Cotton left his pulpit at Plymouth. The church records were at this point kept by Cotton himself, so they not surprisingly prove a vague source of questionable reliability. The entry in Cotton's hand records that his departure came after "sundry church-meetings" and councils with both neighboring ministers and with representatives from nearby towns and churches who recommended that the minister and church part ways. As for the reason behind all this agitation, Cotton only said that "the aspect of providence from this time was such that made way for the pastor and church to part one from another without reflection upon the

¹¹⁹ After Lyford, the church had invited a man named Rogers to the pulpit, but he proved "crazed in his brain." Ralph Smith served 1629-1635 but had to be assisted because he was "a man of low gifts and parts." There was some stability under John Reyner until 1654, but many of the church relocated when new settlements were established nearby. After Reyner's departure the church had no ministry for fifteen years until Cotton was called. Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, xxiii-xxvi.

¹²⁰ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 26; Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, xxxi-xxxii.

church[,] his work seeming now to be at an end.”¹²¹ A later entry in another hand recalled the meeting that was held on October 5, 1697, in which the church addressed Cotton’s request for dismissal. They had already received the result of a council held a week before at the church’s request, which advised that the church should dismiss him. The church complied, and as Cotton stood before the congregation that he had served for three decades, the church “fully released [him] from having any office relation unto them.” This entry also failed to record the instigating factors, noting only that they had been in an “afflicted and distressed condition with reference to the troubles that happened with reference to their pastor.”¹²²

Other sources reveal this to have been something more than a disagreement about the proper balance of lay and pastoral authority. In June of that year, Cotton had written to his son Rowland and enclosed a record of a church meeting held that day at Plymouth “to consider of the sad and scandalous reports that had been raised and spread abroad concerning some miscarriages in the pastor towards Rebekah Morton.” The church had “heard her charges and the pastor’s particular vindications of himself from all those scandals and his confession of one.” Whether because they believed him or because the evidence against him was insufficient, the church concluded that they were “satisfied with him according to rule...and manifest their desires that he would continue to carry on the Lord’s work among them as formerly.” He noted that no one voted against him.¹²³

Samuel Sewall recorded the result of the council that immediately preceded Cotton’s dismissal from Plymouth in his diary, noting that the church had proceeded with him because of

¹²¹ Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 180.

¹²² Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 184.

¹²³ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 541. That record never made it into the church record book, which raises a question about what else might be missing.

“his notorious breaches of the Seventh Commandment, and undue carriage in choosing elders.” Sewall noted that “Thus Christ’s words are fulfilled, unsavory salt is cast to the dunghill. A most awful instance!”¹²⁴ Cotton Mather had also heard the news and lamented in his diary about his “poor uncle at Plymouth” and the “deplorable condition of my fallen uncle.”¹²⁵ In March 1698 Samuel Sewall travelled to Plymouth and met with John Cotton, his wife, and his son Rowland. Sewall had clearly heard about the church council, as evidenced by his entry from the previous October, but he inquired about it again directly from Thomas Faunce, the ruling elder. Before leaving he told Cotton that “a free confession was the best way” and urged him to avoid “catching at shadows, he should neglect the cords thrown out to him by Christ and so be drowned.”¹²⁶ Neither Sewall or Mather gave any indication that they doubted the accusations or that they thought Cotton was being unfairly targeted.

At the end of October 1697, the month that Cotton was dismissed from Plymouth, he wrote to his son Rowland in a desperate state. He reported what he had heard from Rowland’s aunt that his and his wife’s letters would hopefully “move the hearts of some concerned to do what they can for us.” He did not know yet where he would go and was “yet wholly unresolved what course to take as to a journey or abiding this winter,” but he was determined “to be utterly quiet and not to stir a step in moving for present reconcil[iation] with the church.”¹²⁷ Cotton’s wife Joanna also seemed despondent. One can only assume their rapid change of fortunes contributed to or caused her downcast mood. Cotton wrote to her in April 1698, recommending select Bible passages and suggesting she meet with others for a day of fasting, and then

¹²⁴ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:378.

¹²⁵ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:236–37.

¹²⁶ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:389.

¹²⁷ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 543.

proceeded to describe the boundaries of their property holdings in Plymouth. He was convinced that some from the church were conspiring to a “vile resolution” to deprive them of half their land and he hoped that testimony from Rowland about the placement of the marker stone would help his case. He placed the blame on “crafty Tom” who he said was orchestrating behind the scenes to spread the “horrid falsehood” that the stone marked only the highway and not the boundary between the Cottons’ land and the church’s. In another letter to Joanna later that month, Cotton related a conversation in which Mr. Prince told him that Samuel Torrey had been talking about him, saying that “he would have me go somewhere and be retired and not yet issue my case here” because he thought that “whilst I am here they will unite the more against me, and says also, I can be in no straits, having no body to maintain but you, only having lived so well all my days, it seems hard to be shortened.” Torrey said that Cotton could not hope to return to the pulpit in Plymouth but might find a position elsewhere, “which he needed not to have said, for I would not stay here for the world, if I could help it.”¹²⁸

Meanwhile, Cotton began secretly preaching some Sabbaths at Yarmouth and repeatedly reminded his son to keep “total silence” about it. He debated with Joanna about whether to reveal his initial invitation and she advised him to tell Plymouth that “I was invited for this Sabbath, but went not because I would not offend them, and not to say, I am for the next also, but leave the case more general.” He knew from Joseph Rider that “I am really expected there today” but hoped that “my not coming now (I think) cannot hurt me but show some self-denial” and that “their being destitute tomorrow may perhaps advance their hunger for the next Sabb[ath].”¹²⁹ Word of the invitation to preach at Yarmouth had evidently made its way around

¹²⁸ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 551–53.

¹²⁹ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 561–62.

the community regardless of his admonitions to silence. When Cotton went to buy corn from Abiel Shurtleif, a Mr. B. and his wife asked about Cotton's plans to go to Yarmouth, saying they had heard it from Joseph Rider. Cotton asked Rider about this, who told him that he heard from Mrs. Miller that two others had asked Cotton's son to speak to him and they expected him to come. Cotton did not want to offend the people of Yarmouth, but he was also told by Ichabod Wiswall, the minister at Duxbury, that Samuel Torrey and Increase Mather would "take offence if I preach anywhere."¹³⁰

By July 1698, attitudes toward Cotton seemed to be softening in some quarters. He was entertaining the possibility of a position replacing Michael Wigglesworth at Malden, assisted by the Plymouth elder.¹³¹ The Malden offer came from Captain Green after overtures from the Plymouth elder, who visited Cotton "full of tender manifestations of his good will." The elder had spoken with Grindal Rawson about it, who told him that the Massachusetts elders might oppose the arrangement, and John Cotton thought this would certainly happen if Increase Mather heard about it. The elder also implied that he had not been in agreement with Cotton's dismissal and that it had been directed by Torrey; "it is most certain," he said, "had not Mr. T. been there, it had not been as it was." The elder had told Jonathan Russell at the time that the decision was "too severe" and was now actively working for Cotton's rehabilitation, including supporting his

¹³⁰ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 563.

¹³¹ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 28. Wigglesworth had faced his own scandal in 1679 when he married his much younger housemaid, Martha Mudge. See John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Charles William Sever, 1873), 262; Richard Crowder, *No Featherbed to Heaven: A Biography of Michael Wigglesworth, 1631–1705* (Michigan State University Press, 1962), 214, 219–20, 261–62; "Increase Mather to Michael Wigglesworth, 3m. 12d. 1679," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Fourth Series* 8 (1868): 95–96; "Michael Wigglesworth to Increase Mather, 27 October 1684," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Fourth Series* 8 (1868): 645; Michael Wigglesworth, "Some Grounds & Reasons for Laying down My Office Relation," Mss C 1262, R Stanton Avery Special Collections, New England Historic Genealogical Society; Deloraine Pendre Corey, *The History of Malden, Massachusetts, 1633–1785* (Malden: Published by the Author, 1899), 264–65; Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 185–86.

preaching at Yarmouth. Cotton also discussed his belief that the adultery charges in Plymouth had stemmed from his very public support of Increase Mather's charter which had put Plymouth under the political control of Massachusetts Bay, an effort for which Mather was reviled and shunned (to the extent that some would no longer read his books).¹³² Perhaps due to the elder's efforts, however, the Plymouth church apparently consented that Cotton could preach elsewhere.¹³³

Cotton's reputation was not healed, however, and rumors were circulating about his separation from his wife, who remained at Sandwich while he was in Yarmouth. Cotton wrote to Joanna that reports reached him that all the men in the town were "glad and willing I should preach here" but that he heard from Mercy Dunham and Mr. Miller that she "hath vindicated you and me from some considerable aspersions, grounded upon your living so long at Sandwich."¹³⁴ It does not take much imagination to guess about what those aspersions might have been, with their separation coming after the second very high-profile accusation of sexual immorality against Cotton. In any event, Cotton did not end up taking a permanent position in either the Yarmouth church or at Malden. When a new call to a pulpit finally came, it was not from Yarmouth or from Malden, but from South Carolina. The church at Charleston evidently did not mind his questionable reputation, since many of the members had "checkered pasts" of their own.¹³⁵ The church at Plymouth had formally given their consent that he accept the call in October 1698, based on the advice of the council from the previous year.¹³⁶ Cotton Mather

¹³² McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 564–66.

¹³³ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 568.

¹³⁴ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 567.

¹³⁵ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 573.

¹³⁶ Lord, *Plymouth Church Records*, 22:186–87.

wrote in his diary that Cotton received the call after spending three days in fasting and prayer, and that the two ministers spent time together in prayer before his departure.¹³⁷ To this entry, Mather appended a mysterious “memorandum” stating that “the particular articles, in the testimonies (which were single ones) against my uncle, being this day laid before my uncle, he very peremptorily denies the most, and the worst of them.”¹³⁸ No supporting evidence indicates that these were new allegations, but why Mather or Cotton would be revisiting charges from a year prior is unclear.

After Cotton’s departure for Carolina, his wife faced a difficult decision of whether to join him or not, and extant letters indicate that she was resistant—whether she resisted leaving New England or joining her husband, none now can say.¹³⁹ Some New Englanders were rumored to be considering a migration to join him, but this does not seem to have come to fruition before Cotton succumbed to yellow fever in September 1699.¹⁴⁰ News of Cotton’s death traveled quickly. Cotton Mather heard about it in late October from “Mr. Fenwick and others” and celebrated in his diary that his uncle had been able to “die in the service of the church, after the death which there had been upon all hopes of any such matter, by his abdication from his work at Plymouth.”¹⁴¹ Cotton Mather wrote to his uncle’s widow that same day, repeating his relief that Cotton had been once again engaged in ministerial work at the time of his death. Mather’s words of comfort to Joanna included an assertion that it was Plymouth’s loss that this “laborious, and good-spirited, and well-tempered pastor” was removed from them, and that he

¹³⁷ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1: 1681-1709:277.

¹³⁸ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:277.

¹³⁹ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 573.

¹⁴⁰ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:584; McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 584.

¹⁴¹ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:319.

had word from Carolina that Cotton “was extraordinarily serviceable to the interests of religion, and that he enjoyed great esteem and as great success.”¹⁴² Those words may have been small comfort to the long-suffering Joanna. Samuel Sewall got the news of Cotton’s death that same day and wrote that the news “comes to town and is spread all over it.”¹⁴³ Theophilus Cotton, however, did not hear about his father’s death for several days until a passerby told him “he was sorry for my loss, what loss saith I? why saith he haven’t you heard yet, no said I why said he your father is dead, O never was I struck into such amazement in my life.”¹⁴⁴

Another of Cotton’s sons, Josiah, wrote a history of his family that included a summary of his father’s ministerial career. He completely erased the elder Cotton’s time in Wethersfield, saying only that he “remained unsettled several years” until he was called to preach at Martha’s Vineyard. The end of his pastorate in Plymouth came, the son claimed, because “the people (many of them) desirous of novelty or change, taking occasion from some dissatisfaction about the election or confirmation of some ruling elders and some stories supported by two or three single evidences” were able to “thrust him out” even though “several of the church and town stuck by him but were overborn by the major part.” Josiah Cotton sought to glorify his father’s career and the good he had done for his congregations, and made no mention at all of any scandal or any suggestion that either his father’s career or his parents’ marriage was troubled by any accusations of immorality.¹⁴⁵

John Cotton, Jr. faced repeated accusations of sexual indiscretions. He showed hostility during the councils that were summoned to address accusations against him and lobbed insults at

¹⁴² McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 598.

¹⁴³ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:429n12.

¹⁴⁴ McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 600.

¹⁴⁵ Josiah Cotton, “History of the Cotton Family, [ca. 1728]-1755,” 34–44, MS Am 1165, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge MA.

the women who accused him. He also had a network of men who were friends or peers of his father, or who like him were sons of eminent founding settlers. He also kept records of the Plymouth troubles himself, which allowed him to color the scandals to his own benefit. Permanent consequences did not catch up to him until late in his life. Only after he lost his pulpit at Plymouth was he unable to secure another post in New England and he died far away in South Carolina. The scandals he faced in both Wethersfield and Plymouth were part of larger disorders in those churches and perhaps would have stayed in the realm of rumor if not for the congregations' other troubles. Even those men who believed the charges against him, and who were willing to say as much to him directly, celebrated him as a revered minister and lamented his untimely death. By the time his son wrote a family history some decades later, the scandals were all but forgotten, at least officially.

* * *

How many other ministers were under suspicion of improper behavior is impossible to know. Other scandals make slight appearances in letters and other records that do not otherwise appear in official town, church, or colony records. Michael Wigglesworth, the famed author of *Day of Doom*, confided to his diary and to his doctor that he feared he had contracted gonorrhea before his marriage, and filled the pages of his diary with laments about his overactive sex drive.¹⁴⁶ James Sherman, minister at Sudbury, was censured by a council for “many and horrid scandals.”¹⁴⁷ Thomas Cheever, son of famed schoolmaster Ezekiel Cheever and minister at Malden, lost his pulpit after accusations that he violated both the Third and Seventh Commandments. He had been called to Malden even though later testimony showed that there

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, *Diary of Michael Wigglesworth*.

¹⁴⁷ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:514; McIntyre and Travers, *Correspondence of John Cotton Jr.*, 576.

were also “scandals committed before his ordination.”¹⁴⁸ Rumors about other unnamed ministers are hinted at in some diaries, such as the “minister stricken in years, and eminent and remarked all the country over” that Cotton Mather lamented had “lately fallen into those lascivious violations of the Seventh Commandment, which have given a most infamous wound unto religion.”¹⁴⁹

Sexual morality and unwelcome religious opinions had long been linked. A letter to John Winthrop related rumored misdeeds by a conforming curate in old England who had “begot his mother’s maid with child.” The maid was later found dead and the letter’s author strongly implied the curate was guilty of her murder. It was clear that Winthrop’s correspondent saw a relationship between the clergyman’s conforming stance and his immoral activities and was using the story to smear him and, by extension, his adherence to the state church.¹⁵⁰ Lyford, Burdett, Knollys, Larkham, Bachiler, and Cotton all faced accusations of sexual wrongdoing at the same time that other controversies were bubbling in their congregations and towns. These were not ministers who were otherwise universally well-liked. All faced accusations that were heard and believed because of other sources of contention that threatened church and state. Men in authority who were able to act on women’s words did so not in an effort to protect women, but to protect the institutions they held dear—families, churches, and governments.

The cases surveyed here show that ministers whose indiscretions became well-known were those whose transgressions became part of larger political arguments about their churches, towns, and colonies. John Lyford, the ministers in Dover, and Stephen Bachiler were all controversial ministers whose religious practices and political affiliations made them sources of

¹⁴⁸ Thomas, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:105.

¹⁴⁹ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:79.

¹⁵⁰ *Winthrop Papers*, 3:386.

disorder beyond the realm of sexuality. John Cotton, too, had been enmeshed in controversies over his handling of a will and over his support of a new charter. What they all shared, then, was a pattern of public activity that could not, or would not, be ignored. Though most of the allegations described sexual violations that happened out of sight of the public, they had brought scrutiny upon themselves through their public political activities, which in New England included not only riots under a Biblical halberd but also alliance with the archbishop or decisions about which children could be baptized. Certainly, many of the ministers themselves claimed that the accusations were politically motivated.

If these scandals were indeed politically motivated, it is notable that none of them happened in Boston. All took place in outlying areas and made their way to Boston as issues of import to magistrates and ministers. In the relatively small community of New England elites, the doings of ministers even on the fringes of English settlement were clearly well known within Boston to men who assiduously gathered news from correspondents and travelers. John Cotton was also bound to Boston through family connections, but those ties did not protect him, at least in the short term, from facing consequences of his alleged actions. Family connections and famous names did, however, allow him to sufficiently rehabilitate his reputation to eventually find other pulpits. In the case of Cotton, even when he faced new allegations at the end of his life that would seem to confirm the previous stories about him, he was able to secure help in getting another call—though in the distant and undesirable pulpit in Carolina.

In the heated atmosphere of seventeenth-century New England, in which every public word and every religious practice was freighted with political significance, one would be hard pressed to find a minister who was not in some way involved in similar public disputes. More controversial men such as John Davenport, Increase Mather, and Benjamin Colman seem never

to have faced similar accusations. Lyford was far from the only man who wrote disparaging letters to England about the state of affairs in the colony and the other men (including Oldham) do not seem to have been subjected to the same assaults on their character or were able to overcome rumors and resume productive lives in the colonies.¹⁵¹ Even if the scandals were, at their hearts, politically motivated, it is probable that the ministers' enemies were simply taking advantage of talk that had been circulating through rumor and insinuation long before the accusations entered the formal public. Repeated accusations against some ministers lent credibility to the charges against them, or perhaps once a person's reputation was suspect they simply became more vulnerable to allegations in the future. Perhaps victims were more willing to share their own stories after someone else had already opened the gate, having more confidence that their allegations would be believed.¹⁵² Likely, though, many of the rumors were circulating well before they became part of the public record and were only acted upon when other circumstances made it expedient to air women's words to the wider community. The responses to these accusations, too, tell us something about the sex-gender system in early New England. While some accused ministers impugned the reputations of the women who accused them, they focused more steadily on discrediting the men who pushed the allegations into the public sphere. As well, these cases do not reveal a seventeenth-century equivalent of an "old boys' network." Ministers did not close ranks, did not attempt to discredit the accusers, and did not ignore the allegations. Clerical reputation was, like community reputation, something that all ministers were responsible for maintaining. Perhaps their willingness to believe and to punish

¹⁵¹ Among numerous examples in the General Court records and in John Winthrop's journal, just one example is the case of John Pratt, whose argument that his letter was misinterpreted seems to have been accepted and he was not punished. See Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 160.

¹⁵² On this point, see Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 265.

stemmed from a desire to keep their collective reputation unsullied and thereby shore up their authority both in the colonies and in England, particularly in the face of internal and external threats.

Information about the scandals traveled routes sometimes convoluted and sometimes direct, making their way from a woman at one end of the chain to magistrates or colonial officials at the other. These routes almost always involved the written word, despite beginning with women's talk. The lived experience of these women after the scandals became public, however, is largely invisible. The records leave us with a vivid image of ministers dealing with these controversies on an almost daily basis. John Cotton Jr.'s letters in particular show us that he was in near constant conversation about efforts to clear his name and find new employment. The women whose words set these scandals in motion must also have faced daily reminders of their transgressions or of the crimes committed against them but we know the fates of very few of them. Only a few of the ministers' wronged wives appear in the records again. The women with whom the ministers had transgressed—the congregants' wives, the servant maids, the prospective newlyweds—are largely nameless and their lives opaque. For the record keepers, it was enough to indicate whether their words could be trusted, whether their lives and "carriages" were sufficiently blameless to allow others to believe that they told the truth. When they wanted to believe a story enough, magistrates seem to also have been willing to believe less-than-blameless women, such as Bachiler's adulterous wife. While historians of early America have consistently found that women were considered more susceptible to giving in to "carnal desire" and therefore more culpable in sexual immorality, the blame in these cases fell on the seductive ministers rather than their vulnerable female partners.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 18–19.

EPILOGUE

The turn of the eighteenth century was marked by heightened fears of disorder in New England. Recurring wars on the northern border, bad weather, and failed crops brought worries about famine at the same time that refugees from border areas were moving to port towns in large numbers, increasing fears of disorder associated with poverty that were exacerbated by war and economic downturns. Religious toleration imposed in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution threatened puritan ministers' and magistrates' influence over the population while the new charter threatened their political independence. Boston faced repeated and devastating outbreaks of disease, including smallpox and measles epidemics. Through all of this, Boston's population was surging. The town's population more than doubled between 1690 and 1740, rising from 6000 to almost 17,000 in fifty years.¹ These changes altered the context of gossip and watchfulness at the turn of the century and dismantled the alliance that caused male authorities to tolerate and even encourage women's talk during the seventeenth century.

Religious toleration for all Christians except Catholics was required by the new charter and allowed Quakers, Baptists, and the Church of England to gain a permanent foothold in Boston. The disciplinary apparatus of Boston's puritan churches lost effectiveness as a smaller proportion of the population was subject to it. Puritans also risked losing their control over the government since church membership was no longer required for freemanship under the new charter. In the face of this competition, and with membership declining especially among men,

¹ Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 4, 59–63, 102–4, 112–18; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 196–97, 232–36; Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, 427.

puritan churches began adapting the membership processes that had facilitated and encouraged watchfulness over the visible saints. Many churches abandoned public admission narratives altogether and some ended the practice of calling for testimonies in support of new members. Some began to allow baptism to children of non-members. Others allowed non-members to vote on church affairs. Discipline in the churches continued, but its reach shrank as the number of members and especially the number of male members decreased.² The churches, which had once defined moral behavior and trained their congregants in watchfulness, were able to shape the views of a shrinking proportion of Boston's inhabitants.

Aspects of Boston's built environment that had facilitated watchfulness and surveillance in the seventeenth century were also rapidly changing in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Several destructive fires provided an opportunity to widen and straighten streets, which were also paved and graded. Public building projects, including the Long Wharf and a new townhouse, significantly changed the urban landscape. Taverns and inns were increasingly purpose-built rather than operating out of residences.³ These changes meant that people could no longer easily converse across streets in many parts of town, sound did not travel as easily, and there were fewer opportunities for chance observation or eavesdropping. These years also saw marked changes in the architecture of Boston's meetinghouses, which were gradually becoming

² Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 257–60; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 29; Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 144–45; Pope, *Half-Way Covenant*, 272–77; Dunn, “Saints and Sisters,” 590–95; *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. 1 (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1869), 14; Danvers, Mass. First Church records, RG1309, New England Hidden Histories, Congregational Library and Archive, Boston MA, 45; Brattle Square Church, *A Manifesto, or Declaration, Set Forth by the Undertakers of the New Church Now Erected in Boston in New-England, November 17th. 1699*. (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1699).

³ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:42; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Records from 1700 to 1728 [Eighth Report]* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1883), 49–54, 93, 97, 105–6, 110, 112, 137, 141, 171, 197; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 146–47, 152–53, 155–56, 159–60, 165, 209–11; Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, 427–37, 463–66.

churches. New meetinghouses were made of brick, were larger than their wooden predecessors, and increasingly emulated English churches by featuring tall spires outside and box pews inside. Box pews limited visibility to neighbors and concentrated attention on families rather than individuals, reducing the communal aspects of Sabbath services while preserving demonstrations of status.⁴

Houses, too, were changing. The same fires that facilitated improved roadways also motivated the regulation of building materials. With only a handful of exceptions, new buildings were required to be made of stone or brick and roofed with slate or tile, which made them less permeable to sound and provided fewer opportunities for eavesdropping in addition to being more fire-resistant. Changes to interiors meant that privacy, elusive in seventeenth-century homes, was increasingly available in these more robust, less permeable structures. Most people's houses probably remained very similar to those that were common in the seventeenth century, though they were often enlarged and adjusted to conform with new fashions. New houses for the rising merchant class however, what Richard Bushman has called "middling dwellings," had special rooms for entertaining that were separate from working, cooking, and sleeping spaces. Segregating the formal and informal spaces of the house provided opportunities for unobserved behavior and unheard conversations, which had not been nearly so possible in the smaller seventeenth-century houses and their multipurpose rooms. Larger windows, better candles, and changing fireplace construction meant that rooms were used differently. Rather than clustering around sources of heat and light, occupants could sit in furniture pushed against the walls, which also facilitated private conversations. New interior configurations discouraged

⁴ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 169–80.

the prying eyes of neighbors and passersby.⁵ Watchfulness and surveillance, eavesdropping and spying, were made more difficult—and perhaps both less acceptable and more furtive—by these changing interiors.

The decline in church membership among men and the resulting inability of churches to oversee family government caused other institutions to step into the breach. The civil government took increasing responsibility for enforcing family government by enacting new laws, many of which particularly targeted the poor. Children whose parents could not provide for them might be bound out whether their parents were reliant on public assistance or not. The idle poor people could be set to work or confined to the new house of correction or workhouse. No single people were allowed to live from under family government, and women of “ill fame” were prohibited from taking in lodgers. The selectmen, justices of the peace, and Overseers of the Poor began quarterly visits to disorderly and poor families.⁶ Family governors and female neighbors could no longer be relied upon to ensure good household order.

Much of Boston’s population, especially the poor, were probably still policed informally by their neighbors but there was less consensus about what constituted disorder, as evinced by laws that revealed new kinds of recreation were gaining popularity. A law “for the suppressing and punishing of rogues, vagabonds, common beggars, and other lewd, idle and disorderly persons” targeted some oddly specific activities, including juggling, palmistry, and fortune telling. Fines were also imposed on any person or group found to “sing, dance, fiddle, pipe, or

⁵ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:42, 405; Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, 473–84; Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 206–7; Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 100–125; St. George, *Conversing by Signs*, 271.

⁶ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:538–39; *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. 2 (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1874), 182–83; *A Report of the Boston Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen, 1701 to 1715* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1884), 55, 67–68, 185, 241.

use any musical instruments in any of the streets, lanes, or alleys, within any town, in the night-time, or make any rout or other disturbance, to the disquiet and disrest of any of the inhabitants.”⁷ Clearly some inhabitants of Boston were enjoying entertainments that authorities sought to quell, and at times when residents were being disturbed from their sleep.

Laws also focused more specific attention on newly suspicious classes of people. During wars with Catholic France at the end of the seventeenth century, the colony worried that papists might sneak in along with protestant refugees so they required that any French immigrants be approved by the governor and council. Later, Boston ordered the registration of Irish immigrants. Primarily, however, new laws passed in the early years of the eighteenth century focused on regulating the behavior of non-white servants and slaves. They forbade the manumission of black or mixed-race slaves without providing sureties to prevent public charge. A law to “prevent disorders in the night” singled out Indian, black, and mixed-race servants and slaves, blaming them for a recent spike in nighttime disorders and burglaries and barring them from being out of their homes after nine at night, an hour earlier than the curfew for other inhabitants. Laws against unlicensed or unruly drinking establishments singled out those that were “therein harboring and entertaining apprentices, Indians, negroes and other idle and dissolute persons.” Another law aimed to prevent “spurious and mixt issue” by prohibiting fornication between English and black people, who risked being “sold out of the province” if convicted, whether free or enslaved. A duty was also imposed on the importation of African and Indian slaves in an attempt to limit their numbers and encourage the use of white servants

⁷ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:378–81. See also *Boston Town Records, 1700–1728*, 679–82.

instead. The blame for disorder and disruption was increasingly being aimed at non-white inhabitants of the town.⁸

Authorities repeatedly urged a renewed commitment to the Sabbath. At the end of the seventeenth century, Boston's First Church had to remind its members of their responsibility to keep the Sabbath, voting that they would close their shops before sundown on Saturdays and that they would "keep their children and servants within doors."⁹ New Sabbath laws prohibited traveling, laboring, tippling, or other recreation on the Lord's day, including swimming and "unnecessary and unseasonable walking in the streets or fields," and ordered family governors to "take effectual care" that their children, servants, and others under their authority did not violate Sabbath laws. Watching officers also reinforced Sabbath laws and supplemented family government. Towns continued to appoint tithingmen in the early eighteenth century, charged with seeking out unruly drinking establishments and Sabbath-breakers. Tithingmen were also allowed to claim the rewards meant for informers, a shift likely meant to encourage their diligence but also a recognition that disorder was less likely to be reported and informing needed to be institutionalized in a civic office. The night watch was altered too. Now the civilian night watch was only used at times when the military was not being kept, which was rare in a time of recurring wars, and a daytime ward was added on the Sabbath. The watch and ward were charged with interrogating suspicious people, quelling disturbances, and preventing fire, and they were told to take "particular observation and inspection of all houses and families of evil fame." Shaming punishments were still used, and a new law also required that the names of notorious drunkards be posted in public houses. Town meetings were required to have the laws against

⁸ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:90, 223, 327, 519, 535–36, 578–80, 606–7, 634; *Boston Town Records, 1700–1728*, 177.

⁹ Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, 92.

“drunkenness, profaneness, and other immoralities” read aloud annually, and all watching officers were “enjoined and required to exert their utmost zeal and vigor” in enforcing the laws.¹⁰ As in the seventeenth century, laws and watching officers reminded people of their duty to behave in an orderly way, but people were not trusted to act accordingly or enforce these standards on their neighbors or even in their own families.

* * *

Perhaps no one in Boston was as worried about disorder—or as vocal about it—as Cotton Mather. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, Mather saw overwhelming evidence of disorder all around him. He worried about Salem, “which has many poor and bad people in it” who were “especially scandalous for staying at home on the Lord’s days.” He worried, too, about the “sad condition of our frontiers,” where there was “much irreligion and profaneness and disorder” along with the threat of “delusions of popery” encroaching from the north. He worried about disorders among the youth, about drunkenness, and about strangers. He also worried about the disrespect being shown to him as a minister who sought to curtail disorder. And more than anything, he was afraid of the disorder that had crept into the lives of members of his own church. He resolved to exercise strict discipline “that others may hear and fear.”¹¹ Mather seems to have felt that community pressure was insufficient to effect reform among the wayward of his neighborhood and he took on the responsibility himself, often noting that his own visits or letters were required.

¹⁰ *Acts and Resolves*, 1:32, 52, 54, 58–59, 71, 155, 171, 209, 271, 274, 297, 328–29, 381–82, 393, 425, 514, 553, 556, 674, 679–82; *Acts and Resolves*, 2:302, 516, 838; *Boston Town Records, 1700–1728*, 185, 192, 204, 213–14.

¹¹ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:581, 593–94; 2: 22, 72–73, 80, 131, 531.

At the same time that Cotton Mather was lamenting the rise of disorder in his community and seeking ways to involve “good men” in its reform, he also faced disorder in his own family. His oldest son, Increase or Creasy, was accused by a “harlot big with a bastard” of fathering her child and was caught taking part in a “night-riot, with some detestable rakes in the town.” Mather lamented in his diary about the “noise and nonsense carried about the town” and the “persecution of lies daily invented about me” because of his aborted courtship with a young woman shortly after the death of his wife. After he remarried, Mather believed his third wife Lydia was having fits of madness, including frequent and sometimes violent outbursts, which he feared would “bring a ruin on my ministry.” He was aware that “the eye and the talk of the people is very much upon” him, and that they were prone to “invent and report abundance of disadvantageous falsehoods.”¹² His obsession with disorder and with the community’s failure to curtail it was oddly out of step with this fear that his own family disorder would damage his reputation.

By the end of the century, Mather seemed to believe that Boston’s formal watchfulness regime was failing and decided to establish a Society for the Suppression of Disorders, modeled on the Societies for the Reformation of Manners that had sprung up in among adherents of the Church of England in London since the 1690s. In England, these societies enlisted membership from across the economic spectrum. Instead of relying on the eyes and ears of regular people, however, Mather’s Society placed the power of surveillance in the hands of prominent men. These reforming societies differed substantially from the more numerous religious societies that were focused on the spiritual well-being of their members and which included groups for young

¹² Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2:476–77, 484, 487, 586, 611–12. Lydia Mather’s madness is something of a commonplace in works about him, but Virginia Bernhard has convincingly called that assumption into question. Virginia Bernhard, “Cotton Mather’s ‘Most Unhappy Wife’: Reflections on the Uses of Historical Evidence,” *New England Quarterly* 60 (1987): 341–62.

men, for women, and even for black servants and slaves. The reforming societies saw their mission as the surveillance and oversight of the community as a whole and were meant to include only eminent men who took responsibility for the moral welfare and behavior of the town. Mather argued that they should be formed of “between seven and seventeen” members, ideally including a minister and at least one Justice of the Peace. In England the Societies had publicized their efforts and claimed responsibility for the prosecution of vice by publishing annual “black lists” of offenders they helped convict.¹³ Mather’s Society, however, was told to keep their activities secret. Like the English Societies, they also kept their membership anonymous. Mather told them to “divulge neither who they are, nor what they do, one jot further, than the whole society shall allow them.” The goal of these Societies was to make the entire town the “object of their watchful enquiries.” They would encourage the enforcement of laws against vice, and keep offenders under “such a vigilant inspection, that they shall not escape a due chastisement.” They would also harness the power of institutions by encouraging the enforcement of existing laws, agitating for new laws that would rein in vice, suggesting topics for sermons to their ministers, and directing the minister to check up on families that were deficient in family prayer. By “doing good” in their neighborhoods and towns, they would bring God’s blessings upon their own families.¹⁴ These societies allowed male authorities to extend their surveillance networks across the width and breadth of the town, rather than limiting their influence to only their own neighborhoods or their own acquaintances.¹⁵

¹³ Brendan L. Hill, “Puritans in the Public Sphere: The Societies for Reformation of Manners and the Continuity of Calvinism in Early Eighteenth-Century England” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2004); T.C. Curtis and W.A. Speck, “The Societies for the Reformation of Manners: A Case Study in the Theory and Practice of Moral Reform,” *Literature and History* 3 (1976): 45–64.

¹⁴ Cotton Mather, *Methods and Motives for Societies to Suppress Disorders* (Boston, 1703), 2–11.

¹⁵ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158.

Mather's first efforts to establish a Society for the Suppression of Disorders began in February 1701/2, when he noted in his diary that "about a dozen or fourteen good men, some of which are justices," agreed to meet to consider "what and where disorders do arise, in the town," and how they might work to prevent them. Just a few years later, he boasted in his diary that the Society's "number is too large, to admit any more" but there was such interest in joining that he decided to create two more branches, one each in the North and South ends of Boston. Despite these boasts, however, Mather's efforts ultimately failed. He repeatedly tried to revive the Societies during the following two decades when their enthusiasm waned or they dissolved altogether. He tried to encourage them to admonish sinners, particularly when his attention was drawn to specific disorders such as gaming, prostitution, and drunkenness, but with little apparent success. He even enlisted his fellow ministers and asked them to help him revive the Societies, which he said had accomplished "a world of good," an assertion that rings false after nearly two decades of laments that they were fraying and dissolving.¹⁶

Mather's diary makes clear that while he was strenuously working for moral reform, he had become a laughingstock among at least some of the unrulier inhabitants of his neighborhood. He carped about the "foolish, uncivil, and ungrateful carriage, in the people of the town, and my own vicinity towards me."¹⁷ He grumbled about the "knots of riotous young men in the town," who would sometimes stand under his window during the night and "sing profane and filthy songs," which he interpreted as an "insult [to] piety" but may have been intended more as an insult to him.¹⁸ It is possible that some of the prosecutions and church discipline for fornication

¹⁶ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 1:418, 429, 500, 531; 2:78–79, 160, 187, 206–7, 229, 235, 275–76, 283, 767.

¹⁷ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2:204.

¹⁸ Mather, 2:216–17.

and drunkenness during these years were related to the Societies' activities, but they did not publicly claim any credit in the way London societies had and despite the commitment authorities showed to regulating morality and policing disorder, Mather was unable to sustain his societies. Men wanted women, servants and slaves, youths, and the poor to obey but seemingly had little interest in enforcing the regulations. They left enforcement to the constables and informing to the tithingmen.

* * *

Watchfulness was losing its force in civil life, and holy watching was losing ground in at least some churches as well. Mutual watchfulness was clearly failing in the Cambridge church by the mid-1730s when they complained at a meeting that some of those who had been baptized, owned the covenant, or even become church members were “disorderly walkers” and were prone to gaming, excessive drinking, and “profane conversation.” The members agreed to “more faithfully watch over one another” and to counsel, exhort, and admonish one another when needed. Soon after, however, they appointed a committee to “inspect and observe the manners of professing Christians among us, and such as are under the care and watch of this church.” This committee took over the duties of watchfulness that members were failing to exercise, with a duty to inquire into suspected misbehavior and issue admonitions to any who offended. They were adamant that this did not excuse others from exercising watchfulness, but establishing the committee was a tacit acknowledgment that they were not doing this. Far from encouraging a return to mutual watch, the Cambridge church institutionalized the practice of separating watching from daily life and they continued to appoint these committees year after year, even

into the 1770s.¹⁹ Watchfulness, once a responsibility of all church members, was now entrusted to an appointed committee of men.

At least some foundations and practices of surveillance seemed to be breaking down in the early eighteenth century. Watchmen failed to prevent fires, thefts, and drunken revelries. Fewer Bostonians were becoming full church members or even halfway members, and forced toleration diversified the religious landscape. The urban population grew past the point of every face being familiar. Cotton Mather tried to harness watchfulness in a new way, one that lodged the power of talk firmly in the hands of prominent men in the community. While his efforts were unsuccessful, the Societies for the Suppression of Disorder, like the watch and tithingmen before them, did not signal a failure of informal watchfulness. Gossip continued, and it continued to police behavior, to excuse it, and to shape it. The religious imperative that sanctioned curiosity about one's neighbors had shaped the culture of Boston in ways that reached beyond meetinghouse walls. As the eighteenth century went on, some of the mantle of watchfulness and moral enforcement was taken up by the non-puritan churches that had once been shunned as disorderly. Baptists and later Methodists embraced many of the structures that had animated communal watchfulness in early New England, focusing on moral discipline, self-watch, and community support for moral uprightness.²⁰

Changes experienced in Boston in the early eighteenth century did not limit the exchange of gossip but did alter the ways it was understood by male authorities. This feminized speech had lost its utility to them and no longer provided the benefits of enhanced watchfulness. It

¹⁹ Sharples, *Cambridge Church Records*, 128–33, 250.

²⁰ Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 75–89, 105–7; Anna M. Lawrence, *One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 36–43.

could no longer be harnessed for their interests, which meant the dangers of women's speech outweighed its benefits for them. Its uses for women continued and continue to this day, but without the sanction and the ear of male authorities its effectiveness for women as a tool to shape society and protect themselves was also limited. None of this is to say that women lost access to information or that their practice of sharing it lessened, but the power associated with information was consolidated in the hands of male authorities, and as women were increasingly excluded from institutions like courtrooms, gossip continued to police local disorder but women's words had less power to shape the institutions under which they lived and through which the politics of speech were defined.

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