

Review: Crimes of Gender in Puritan America

Reviewed Work(s): *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* by Carol F. Karlsen; *Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women* by Margaret O. Thickstun

Review by: Paul J. Lindholdt

Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 563-568

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713005>

Accessed: 04-10-2019 00:57 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*

Crimes of Gender in Puritan America

PAUL J. LINDHOLDT

Western Washington University

The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England. By Carol F. Karlsen. New York: W. W. Norton, 1987. xvii + 360 pages. \$22.95.

Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women. By Margaret O. Thickstun. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. xi + 176 pages. \$19.95.

STUDENTS OF EARLY AMERICAN CULTURE WILL NOT BE SURPRISED THAT BOTH CAROL Karlsen and Margaret Thickstun “find against” Puritan attitudes toward women. As Thickstun observes in her excellent chapter “The Pauline Precedent,” non-conforming English and American Protestants alike held staunchly to Paul’s dictum in Corinthians that “the head of every man is Christ; the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God” (6). In the great chain of being, women occupied a slot just above the beast of the field. But students should ask whether this discriminatory world view was peculiar to the Puritans, or if, instead, it points to a paradigm dominant in seventeenth-century European culture. Thickstun, whose study focuses on literature, might have strengthened her argument by comparing attitudes among Catholics and other Protestants in order to demonstrate with greater conviction that Puritans possessed less generous views toward women. Carol Karlsen, who concentrates chiefly on historical records to make her case, distinguishes more effectively between “traditional” and “Puritan” beliefs. The first were long-established and transmitted orally from generation to generation;

Paul J. Lindholdt teaches in the English Department at Western Washington University. He edited *John Josselyn, Colonial Traveler: A Critical Edition of “Two Voyages to New England”* (University Press of New England, 1988).

“Puritan” beliefs, conversely, were both written and articulated by ministers and other literate leaders of New England.

Karlsen and Thickstun marshal plenty of evidence, especially pertinent to modern scholarship, that female physiology obsessed writers and theologians of the time. Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, beholding an imaginary dame, raves about the “riotous appetite” she displays beneath the waist, whose domain “is all the fiends”; / There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption” (IV. vi. 123, 127–29). This was the Puritan inheritance. For instance, the Puritan rite of “churching” derived from the Jewish mikvah, a purifying bath required before marriage and after menstruation and childbirth; Thickstun shows us that the practice survived to inform a sonnet by the English Puritan John Milton, who pleads prayerfully that his “Late Espoused Saint” be physically and spiritually cleansed of “child-bed taint” upon her death. The mysteries of gynecology and female sexuality consistently frightened men; and men typically explained these mysteries by reference to the supernatural. Witchcraft, therefore, came to be associated intimately with sex.

The Protestant Church, as Karlsen best explains, often cited the wisdom of older European traditions to explain how the sex drive of females made them more prone than men to evil. One of the most influential documents advancing this view was *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) by German writers Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger. Karlsen’s intriguing research traces historical consequences of their notion that “ ‘All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable’ ”; for the sake of fulfilling these lusts, women “ ‘consort even with devils’ ” (156). If this belief underlies Western culture as deeply as Karlsen supposes, it goes far to account for both popular and literary stereotypes of women.¹

Fixations with female sexuality shape plots of dramatic poems and novels by and about Puritans, Thickstun contends. Her study implies much about American culture although it treats only one American, Nathaniel Hawthorne—after chapters devoted to his English predecessors Edmund Spenser, John Milton, John Bunyan, and Samuel Richardson. *Fictions of the Feminine* strives to provide a feminist critique of St. Paul’s doctrine as it shapes the portrayals of women in Puritan texts. Thickstun admires Hawthorne as “a protodeconstructionist” for his role in dissecting the mythos of the Pilgrim founders; nonetheless, he remains a product of his culture and his gender, in Thickstun’s view, so his rendering of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* is flawed.

The broad assumptions with which Thickstun begins, and the narrow deductive approaches she employs, are apt to make more readers than the present one uncomfortable. Hawthorne is *not* a Puritan, even though his ancestors were; nor is he sympathetic to Puritan views. For these reasons he seems an ill-chosen successor to the English elders in her study, even though the main point of Thickstun’s study is well taken. Because Protestant world views pronounced female sexuality to be suspect, women in literature very often undergo “an earthly suffering

mandated” not only by the Bible but also “by biological necessity” (131). One of the best contemporary examples is Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, involving a man who rejects a woman’s love because she’s menstruating; as a consequence, she charges him with rape.

In early America, the twin issues of sex and rebellion come together most dramatically in the plight of Anne Hutchinson. Remembered variously as “the American Jezebel” and a leader of “the Antinomian crisis,” Hutchinson functioned actually as a scapegoat for New England patriarchs who sensed that their grip on the public imagination in Boston was slipping in the late 1630s. Her story is well known. Hutchinson held weekly Bible study groups in her home; she criticized the clergy and claimed to have received grace without their mediation; eventually she was condemned as a heretic, excommunicated, and expelled from the community. But the contemporary editorials about her trial, the insinuations of witchcraft and adultery, now loom larger than the eighty-odd “errors” of which ultimately she was convicted. The details that have come down to us prove once more that history is every bit as subject to interpretation as literature. The deformed fetuses born to Hutchinson and her cohort Mary Dyer—especially as their advent is “read” by Governor John Winthrop and Captain Edward Johnson—are corporeal insignia of their mothers’ twisted ambitions. At the hands of John Winthrop, Dyer afterward was forced to undergo the exhumation of her baby’s corpse, a retributive humiliation that has received too little scholarly attention, even though Karlsen and Thickstun are only the latest readers in a long line to have examined this Antinomian episode of Massachusetts history.² Karlsen wisely concludes that “Hutchinson’s interpretation of Puritan doctrine allowed women a vastly enlarged sphere of religious activity,” and that her threat to the Boston saints and magistrates resided in her gender (18). Like Sonia Johnson when she challenged the Mormon Church nearly 350 years later, Anne Hutchinson erred not only ideologically but also in ways that polite citizens still hesitate to name.

Again, witchcraft often came to be associated with sex, and it still is: witness Linda Blair’s misbehavior with a crucifix in *The Exorcist*. All manner of gender-based behaviors could hale early American suspects into court. Some litigants charged their tormentors with such preposterous crimes that one wonders how the gullibility of even the most biased judge could have remained intact. Karlsen observes that witchcraft took forms as commonplace as “hindering the churning of butter and the brewing of beer” (23) or as novel as “causing a man’s breast to swell ‘like a Womans’ ” (32). In a period when sympathetic magic yet prevailed, when correspondences between spirit and matter were spoken of as doctrine, men could believe their kinswomen capable of causing grave wrongs to homes and health. The woman who presumed too much skill in the medical or herbal arts risked accusations of witchcraft, for her talent identified her as one versed in forms of divination originating outside the Christian ministry. Thickstun is right to examine the foundations of the faith, but her study is too short, too conjectural,

relying too much on literary surfaces. Not only Pauline proscriptions but biblical wisdom as a whole called feminine behavior into question. (We should hesitate to use past tense, since the Bible still determines so much American thought.) In the King James rendering of Solomon, *strange* means promiscuous, but only as the term applies to women: "For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell" (Proverbs 5: 3–6). The association of sexuality with evil goes back a long way, and the fate for temptresses was always harsher than for men.

The Devil in the Shape of a Woman fully documents the ridiculous laws and quaint speeches and case histories that bring historical scholarship down to earth. At the same time, Karlsen has a scientist's disinterest in her subjects. She skillfully compiles evidence in the form of original visual aids; fairly and inductively approaches her materials; gingerly avoids the big conjecture and the sweeping generalization. She notes that sporting a silk scarf in 1653 constituted a crime if the wearer's husband were worth less than £300 (96). Without condescending to readers less well versed in history than she, Karlsen tests the effects on women of the central tenets of Protestantism (for example, the principle of the priesthood of all believers). Fruitfully she counterpoints Quakerism and Puritanism, especially as the sects responded to "female spiritual leadership: . . . Because God revealed his word to all," among the Friends "there was no need for an ordained ministry" (122). Karlsen's study relies so heavily on demographics that the jargon of the social scientist sometimes infects the prose, as in the operational disclaimer that "this technique collapses a longitudinal view into a cross-sectional analysis and, barring any significant atypicality in the sample, should yield a roughly accurate picture of age distribution" (291n). The issue of age among witchcraft suspects proves more crucial than it might seem; her research ultimately upholds the popular image of the witch as an old woman, for most charges fell on the shoulders of the middle-aged and elderly, even though "females of *all* ages were susceptible to witchcraft allegations—from four-year-old Dorcas Good of Salem to twenty-eight-year-old Elizabeth Blackleach of Hartford, to forty-seven-year-old Isabella Towle of Hampton, to seventy-five-year-old Margaret Scott of Rowley" (64–65). The litany of names is kept manageable by virtue of an appendix offering profiles of those accused witches who appear most frequently in the text. Nor is Ms. Karlsen above importing the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*; instructively, this figure "resembles the most negative recent depictions of New England witches" (310n). Karlsen's study is provocative, wide ranging, accessible, and frank. She concludes that the traditional and Puritan beliefs combined when economic clashes "exposed the fear of independent women" (213), who proved to be the most common victims of New England's legal system. Specifically, "anxieties about inheritance lay at the heart of most witchcraft accusations" (84).

Fictions of the Feminine complements Karlsen insofar as it treats literary Pu-

ritanism from somewhat the same perspective as Karlson treats historical Puritanism. In fine deconstructive fashion, Thickstun argues that her male writers sow the seeds of their own remediation: “because its authors place themselves self-consciously in the Pauline tradition, Puritan literature offers the tools with which to correct its own deformations” (33). Again, we can “appreciate the complexity and theological richness of these texts without feeling required to condone the doctrines they espouse; [a feminist critique] explains and confirms our discomfort” (158).

Not so long ago critics praised Henry James for his use of unreliable narrators, who complicated plots and heightened tension; Hawthorne now suffers in Thickstun’s hands because his narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* undercuts the latent strengths of Hester Prynne. Like a badgering conscience, Hawthorne’s morally inept storyteller forever blocks the author’s impulse to trash Puritan ideology (152). During the days of the New Criticism, ambiguity improved a text by enhancing its richness, by increasing the interpretive possibilities. But Milton now comes in for trouble because his syntax in one spot in *Paradise Lost* “purposely leaves unclear” who is transferring guilt to whom (79). Thickstun seems to be writing an installment in what accurately has been termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”³ that is, an interpretive science presuming that literary texts and their (male) authors conceal as much as they reveal. It may be old-fashioned to say so, but the edge of her credibility might be honed by looking into *Transactions* of the Royal Society to find whether the New Science either affirmed or denied the gender-based assumptions (for example, “biological necessity”) that deform Puritan texts.

Carl Bridenbaugh once noted that the Bible offered an attractive appeal to colonists eager to populate the world.⁴ It was, for those who read it as such, a potent promotional tract generating beliefs in the plausibility of a paradise on Earth, a paradise for many that was the New World. What has come most recently to light, however, is evidence that certain texts of the Bible have long been and are still being brandished to thwart women’s struggles for liberation. Both books presently under review make this case persuasively, though differently, and at some risk to their authors, for no one shows better than they that the crime of feminine assertion traditionally has called up the fires of hell and the terrors of social damnation.

NOTES

1. Contemporary literary critics have explored the dynamics of the dangerous “dark ladies” of American fiction, women who oppose their fairer and more ingenuous counterparts. Especially in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, these dark women share some of

the characteristics of witches. See particularly Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (rev. ed. New York, 1966), 291–336.

2. Most of the primary documents relating to Hutchinson's role in the Antinomian Controversy are compiled in *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, ed. David D. Hall (Middletown, Conn., 1968). The most detailed secondary study is Emery Batts, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill, 1962). On the detail of the stillborn children, see Anne Jacobson Schutte, " 'Such Monstrous Births': A Neglected Aspect of the Antinomian Controversy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 85–106; Schutte studies historical precedents and scientific bases for "monster" births. She appears convinced that contemporary records on Dyer and Hutchinson accurately convey obstetric facts.

3. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, 1984), xii.

4. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen, 1590–1642* (New York, 1968), 401–02.