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Did the Puritans Have Fun? Leisure, Recreation and the Concept of Pleasure in Early New England

BRUCE C. DANIELS

As any parent or pet-owner knows, play seems to be a natural part of life. Dogs and cats wrestle, chase their tails, and scamper in races; monkeys, fish, and birds dance; children make toys out of any nearby prop. Play is older than man and seems to be one of the inevitable characteristics that evolution has built into all beings above the level of the most basic species. Both quiet play and active play – leisure and recreation – have a therapeutic effect that make creatures seek them. Play is ubiquitous psychologists say, because fun is essential in order to do the serious things of life – work, survive, reproduce, and live in social groups.¹ Why then does it jar our sensibilities to think of Puritans playing and having fun? Why is it necessary to remind people – to persuade them against their instinctive reaction – that the religious settlers of colonial New England sought relaxation and pleasure in their lives? Many societies past and present have reputations for restrictive views of the pursuit of pleasure, but few peoples conjure up as strong an image of asceticism as the Puritans do.

For over four centuries “puritan” has been a synonym for dour, joyless, repressed behaviour. Few historical concepts have proven so strong: from the literati of Elizabethan England through the critics of the Moral Majority in the 1980s, the image of the Puritan as killjoy has endured. Colonial Yorkers and Virginians, nineteenth-century novelists and historians, twentieth-century reformers and liberals – in fact, just about everyone else in American history – has thanked their lucky stars

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¹ Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 1–2, for a discussion of the role of play in culture.

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that they did not have to submit to the Puritans' iron regimen. A long list of "iconoclasts" have made a good intellectual living trying to outdo each other by debunking the Puritans and their inability to have fun. Contemporary wags such as Captain Thomas Morton, James Franklin, and the Reverend Samuel Peters, themselves self-described victims of Puritan censoriousness, and modern wits such as H. L. Mencken and Moses Coit Tyler, have not been unduly troubled by a strict sense of fairness or accuracy as they created quotable *bon mots*. Mencken's quip that Puritanism was "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" seems destined to haunt Puritans forever; Tyler's accusation that Puritans "cultivated the grim and the ugly" is an equally devastating indictment of their contempt for expressions of joy in beauty.² More thoughtful literary figures such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Miller, and Robert Lowell and scholars such as James Truslow Adams and Vernon Parrington have gone beyond the cheap shots of the Mencken-style wits and tried to extract a deeper meaning from the Puritan experience.³ The Puritan that emerges from their analyses is no longer the caricature of a guilt-ridden, hypocritical killjoy; their Puritan is just as sober, just as serious, but far more believable with far more of a sinister effect on subsequent American development. An anti-liberal, anti-democratic, totalitarian strain that courses through American history emanates from this Puritan – the joyless fanatic who shares the timeless qualities of the true believer with such historical figures as Cromwell,

² For discussions of the humorous attacks on the Puritans by their contemporaries see John P. McWilliams, Jr., "Fictions of Merry Mount," *American Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *AQ*), 29 (1977), 3–30; Richard Drinnon, "The Maypole of Merry Mount: Thomas Morton and the Puritan Patriarchy," *Massachusetts Review*, 21 (1980), 382–410; Michael Zuckerman, "Pilgrims in the Wilderness: Community, Modernity, and the Maypole at Merry Mount," *New England Quarterly*, (hereafter cited as *NEQ*), 50 (1977), 255–77; C. R. Kropf, "Colonial Satire and the Law," *Early American Literature*, 12 (1977–78), 234–38; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 333–35. For a convenient brief survey of more recent attacks on the Puritans by people such as Mencken see David Hall (ed.), *Puritanism in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1968). See also Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature, 1607–1765*, 2 vols. (Williamstown, MA: Corner House Publishers, 1973; orig. pub. 1873), 263–64.

³ The major literary works referred to here and their dates and places of first publication are: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1850); and Hawthorne, "The Maypole of Merry Mount," *Twice Told Tales*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1850); Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York: Viking, 1953); Robert Lowell, *Endecott and the Red Cross* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968); James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921); Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. I (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1927).

Robespierre, and Lenin. Both frivolous and serious critics of the Puritans have in common, however, the implicit belief that if only colonial New Englanders could have let their hair down a little, modern Americans might have been spared a host of problems ranging from silly prudery to the destructive force of McCarthyism.

Probably more than any other piece of literature, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* cemented the image of the joyless Puritan into the American mind. Not content to practice mere self-denial, Hawthorne's Puritans opposed happiness, leisure, and recreation anywhere they found it. Hawthorne, however, was transfixed with the idea that joy cannot be forever banished; suppression, of necessity, will be temporary and joy will inevitably come bubbling up in every society. Hence, recreational impulses surface repeatedly and unexpectedly in all of his characters. Puritan children "play" at going to church; Hester has occasional "sportive impulses"; Chillingsworth's "mock smile...played him false"; Dimmesdale feels a "strange joy" in Pearl's "game" of whispering in his ear; Pearl is a "plaything of the angels." Lurking just beneath the surface in *The Scarlet Letter*, and also in Hawthorne's lesser-known, "The Maypole of Merry Mount," is his belief that the Puritans were trying to accomplish the impossible by restraining basic human instincts: joy and play were bound to emerge despite all efforts to banish them. Tyler, whose literary history of the colonies was profoundly influenced by Hawthorne, restated this theme in his appraisal of the Puritan's vain attempt to "eradicate poetry from his nature" where it "was planted...too deep even for his theological grub-hooks to root it out."⁴

Not until the 1930s did any serious body of work challenge the views of Hawthorne and the many historians who embedded his fictive analysis in explicit historical narratives. Modern Puritan scholarship began with the publication in 1930 of Samuel Eliot Morison's *Builders of the Bay Colony*, and received its most influential statement with the publication in 1939 of Perry Miller's *The New England Mind in the Seventeenth Century*.⁵ Morison softened, warmed, and humanized the Puritans; Miller subjected their intellect and theology to one of the most extraordinarily rigorous and penetrating analyses ever attempted by any scholar of any discrete body of thought. In a series of biographical vignettes, Morison described

⁴ Mark M. Hennelly, Jr., "The Scarlet Letter: A Play-Day for the Whole World?" *NEQ*, 61 (1988), 530-54; Drinnon, "The Maypole of Merry Mount," 384; Tyler, *A Literary History*, 264.

⁵ Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930); Miller, *The New England Mind in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939).

individual Puritans enjoying life's pleasures. In his massive tome, Miller argued that joy, leisure, and recreation had a legitimate place in a Puritan cosmology that was far more complex than had hitherto been imagined. Miller's work was immensely influential on an entire generation of historians. One scholar called it as persuasive and pervasive in American history as Copernican Astrology or Newtonian Physics were in the world of science.⁶ To call the colonist who emerged from the work of Morison and Miller a happy Puritan oversimplifies but does not do an injustice to the essence of their conclusions. The new Puritans actively sought and experienced pleasure in their lives. Moreover, their pursuit of certain types of pleasure was not only sanctioned but actively encouraged by the ministerial elite.

Morison based his picture of the happy Puritan on a few essential facts that seemed to have eluded his predecessors. New England's Puritans were not strict Calvinists; the fire and brimstone sermons that had been used as examples of a terrifying religion were the product more of the mid-eighteenth than of the seventeenth century; the doggerel poetry of Michael Wigglesworth, which was indeed joyless, was no more representative of Puritanism than was the sensual, loving poetry of Anne Bradstreet; and the Puritans did not prohibit alcohol as many people thought but instead maintained taverns in almost every town. Morison's descriptive passages attached a great deal of importance to drink and the presence of taverns. This is not surprising when we remember that he was writing at the end of a decade of prohibition whose origins were often attributed to the allegedly abstemious Puritans. Nor, as he made clear, was the Puritan desire for drink indulged in behind the backs of the authorities. "Beer, cider, even hard liquor were provided at town expense," according to Morison, "to attract unpaid helpers at [house-raising] and to provide the necessary courage to walk out on a stringer or ridgepole." A church parish providing poor relief for some of its members listed "malt and wine" as among the necessities of life. Morison's picture of life in a seventeenth-century New England small town sounds a little like one that might be drawn by Norman Rockwell except that Morison might add a few ribald panels. His picture of Boston is a larger, more urbane version of the same happy setting: consider the following charming scene:

The ordinary week-day scene in Boston of the sixteen-fifties was active and colourful enough to suit a Dutch painter. Holland, France, Spain, and Portugal

⁶ Michael McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies in the 1960s," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *WMQ*), 27 (1970), 64.

coming hither for trade, shipping going on gallantly, taverns doing a roaring trade, with foreign sailors and native citizens, boys and girls sporting up and down the streets, between houses gay with the fresh color of new wood and the red-painted trim; the high tide lapping into almost every backyard and garden; and Beacon Hill towering above all.⁷

If one looks at this description closely, Morison does not say much: Boston had foreign trade, taverns, children, painted houses, tide, and a hill. But, when the shipping is *gallant*, the taverns *roaring*, the children *sporting*, the houses *gay*, the high tide *lapping*, and the hill *towering*, all thoughts of Nathaniel Hawthorne's crabbed killjoys suddenly seem to vanish. Morison's evocative, compelling prose dressed up his substantive insights – which by themselves were important – in ways that any modern advertising executive would recognize as pure selling genius.

Few readers are likely to accuse Perry Miller of charming his way to dominance as the leading American intellectual historian of the twentieth century. His complex prose makes for very slow reading. Miller's influence lies in the strength of his analysis which attempted to make a coherent whole out of a seemingly diverse body of religious, political, social, and moral thought that he brought together and identified as the "Puritan mind." Previous scholars, Miller believed, had misread Puritan ideals. When the Puritans failed to live according to these ideals – as they were mistakenly defined by scholars – the disappointed historians called the Puritans failures and hypocrites. The real failure, Miller argued, lay not within Puritan civilization but within the inability of subsequent scholars to penetrate its thought.

The most obvious discrepancy between theory and practice that most historians had identified was between the ideal of piety and the practice of piety. Their ideal should have sent the Puritans on "a solitary flight to the desert," according to their critics' expectations, and "attired them in the hair shirt of repentance." But the Puritans went not to the desert but to Massachusetts and Connecticut, and they wore comfortable cloaks and waistcoats of attractive colors. Hence, historians have thought that Puritans lacked the courage of their convictions – convictions, Miller writes, however, the Puritans never had and would have considered absurd. Puritan piety never admired the extreme ascetic. Neither did it embrace a "gloomy, otherworldly, and tragic conception of life, which sought to forbid...relaxations." Puritans may have been toughminded judging sinners, they may have been complacent about the superior virtues of their own beliefs, but they never argued that virtue had no room

⁷ Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, 130, 131, 148.

for “cakes and ale.” Life in general could be grim to the Puritans and they seldom lost complete sight of the pain, unhappiness and harsh circumstances of the world. Yet they believed that lives on earth should have, as the minister Samuel Willard wrote, “sometimes their extasies.” Similarly, the Puritan’s emphasis on the next world did not cause them to reject the present world and worldly senses. Preparation for heaven did not mean that one should not try to bring the earthly “wilderness to blossom.” In particular, Miller said, historians have so over-stated the Puritans’ emphasis on original sin that it has cast a depressing pallor over their daily lives. Original sin to the Puritans was largely a “metaphysical convenience,” according to Miller to help them solve some pressing theological problems. They believed in original sin, but it was not a body of thought that inflicted an omnipresent sense of sin and tragedy on every occurrence.⁸

After discarding the picture of the Puritan as failed ascetic – as a dark, brooding creature carrying Adam on his shoulders every waking hour – Miller creates a new, much happier picture of the Puritan as a religious person preparing for the next world but also a social person committed to enjoying moderate pleasures in the present one. “God has given us temporals to enjoy,” Miller quotes the minister Joshua Moody: “we should therefore suck the sweet of them, and so slake our thirst with them, as not to be insatiably craving after more.” Pleasure had a useful role in the Puritan cosmology: never did Puritans believe that actions were sinful merely because they were enjoyable. Moderate pleasures, as Moody instructed his congregation, prevented one from pursuing immoderate ones. Eating, relaxing pastimes, and sexual gratification, the Puritan ministers argued, all gave refreshing pleasures that when practiced in moderation benefited the individual and hence the community. Gluttony, idleness, and lust, however, resulted when pleasure-seeking was carried to an extreme and became an end unto itself: these immoderate pleasures were a sin and should be punished. Thus, Moody writes further on, that enjoyable actions are never sinful if “they remain subordinate to their utility; they become reprehensible as soon as they are practiced for their delectability alone. The people of God are free to use the things of this life ... for their convenience and comfort; but yet he hath set bounds to this liberty, that it may not degenerate into licentiousness.”⁹

In the half-century since Miller published *The New England Mind in the Seventeenth Century*, critics have questioned a variety of the implications of

⁸ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 35–41, and *passim*.

⁹ Moody quoted in Miller, *Ibid.*, 40–41.

his work and many of its nuances. Almost no one, however, has questioned the basic premise that Puritan ideology allowed for and encouraged a moderate amount of leisure and recreation, provided such pleasures remained subordinate to Scripture, the glorification of God, and the good of the community. The acceptance of a Puritan more at ease with joy and comfort has allowed scholars to produce hundreds of books and articles on New England culture that has this new, more relaxed and likeable Puritan at the center of the story. No historian has done more to chase Mencken's and Hawthorne's joyless Puritan out of New England than Edmund Morgan, one of Miller's first students. In his book on the Puritan family, probably the book on colonial history most frequently used in the university classroom, Morgan described the Puritan in terms one might use for the affable guy next door: "he liked good food, good drink, and homey comforts... he found it a real hardship to drink water when the beer gave out." Morgan, of course, wrote also of the genuine deep piety that suffused Puritan ideals and practice, but it is his emphasis on the idea that "God did not forbid innocent play" that has stayed with generations of students. In other books, Morgan's biography of John Winthrop, Massachusetts's first governor, made the stern leader into a tender, loving husband who controlled but enjoyed his passions; and, his biography of Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale College in the eighteenth century, described the minister-educator as a "gentle Puritan" who delighted in good company and the refined pleasures of the intellect. Even more than these distinguished books, Morgan's article, "The Puritans and Sex," etched the picture of the happy, well-adjusted Puritan into the modern historical consciousness. A repressed sexuality and a hatred of liquor were frequently cited as the two most prominent examples of the anti-pleasure impulse in Puritanism. Morison and others had destroyed the utility of the one example by establishing beyond a shadow of a doubt that Puritans enjoyed beer and drink; Morgan attacked the accuracy of the other example by arguing that Puritans enjoyed sex, were told by their ministers and theology that sex in the proper channels should be enjoyed, and in general had as healthy an attitude towards sex as one could hope to find anywhere. Far from being squeamish, Morgan's Puritans treated sex in more matter-of-fact terms than twentieth-century Americans do.¹⁰

¹⁰ Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (orig. pub. 1944; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 16; Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958); *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962); Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *NEQ*, 15 (1942), 591-607.

What was left to sustain the image of the dour, repressed killjoy? The Puritan who stopped off at the tavern for a glass of beer after work, made love that night, and went to church the next day with a clear conscience, did not seem to be either an ascetic or hypocrite. The practical effect of the Morison–Miller–Morgan school of Puritan scholarship was to make the Puritans into real people – people who were religious and believed in a strict moral code; people who shared a harshness characteristic of most of seventeenth-century society; but people with sex drives, appetites, a sense of humor, and an appreciation of the need for pleasure and joy in everyday life. Sincerity, consistency, decency, moderation – these were the words attached to the Puritans’ attitudes towards leisure, recreation, and morality to replace words like fanatic, hypocrite, ascetic, and killjoy. Not a boisterous person in anyone’s estimation, the new, happy Puritan enjoyed “durable satisfactions” in Morison’s summary estimation.¹¹

Few major works questioned the new view of Puritans and pleasure or opened up any fresh lines of inquiry into New England society. In the 1960s, a group of scholars who called their work the “new social history” challenged the dominance of intellectual history and did indeed open up new lines of inquiry that are still being pursued at present. The new social historians rooted their work in large samples of quantifiable data and claimed to be much more empirical – much more scientific – than their predecessors had been, who dealt primarily with literary evidence. Much of this work took the form of community studies which attempted to recreate the reality of everyday life for average people. The new social history brought to the discipline of history a type of methodology long practiced by social scientists. When historians went to the local community to evaluate patterns of everyday life in relation to the ideology and values of society, they were, in effect, employing the methods that the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas pioneered in their field work in the early twentieth century.¹²

Darrett Rutman in “The Mirror of Puritan Authority,” an article that truly deserves to be called seminal, put the challenge pointblank to the intellectual historians: “was the ideal,” he asked, “so often expressed by the articulate few and commented upon by historians – ever a reality in New England? Certainly, conditions in America were not conducive to it,” Rutman argued. How was the “abstract principle...toyed with by logicians” applied to the reality of the New England town and church?

¹¹ Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, 57, 217.

¹² John Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies,” *AQ*, 34 (1982), 222–25.

The questions asked by Rutman were essentially the same ones posed by the work of social historians for all fields of history. Was there a divergence between the rhetoric expressed in literary evidence and the reality reflected in the daily living habits of the general public? Did the Puritan ideal impose itself upon behaviour or did behaviour render the ideal irrelevant?¹³ Questions such as these, of course, cannot be answered by intellectual historians. The questions are posed by social historians and only social history can answer them. Moreover, crucial secondary questions arise from the general one about the practical effect on daily behaviour of abstract principles. A majority of colonial New Englanders were not members of the church: did non-church members have different attitudes towards pleasure than church members did? New England had urban, rural, and frontier communities: did they have differing patterns of behaviour and differing exposures to Puritan ideals? Did seacoast and backcountry differ? Did the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island? Did servants and the poor act and believe differently than freemen and the elite? Questions of this type which have been asked repeatedly in the generation of the new social history make it painfully clear that the intellectual historians who created the picture of the warm, human Puritan who sought pleasure in moderation painted the picture with a much sharper focus than their evidence warranted. We know what some Puritan leaders said about pleasure, but we do not know what most Puritans did. The ministerial elite may have written of the quiet, sensual joys of sex within marriage and the sinfulness of sex outside of marriage. But, to say is not necessarily to do. Puritans may have been guilt-ridden, repressed and squeamish despite what their ministers told them; or they may have been lusty, ribald sexual sinners who carried on illicit sex in spite of what their ideology said. As Rutman wrote in 1965 at the beginning of the social history generation, the answers to questions such as these were not known.

The physical circumstances attendant upon the founding of New England certainly posed a challenge to the imposition of rigidly prescribed rules of conduct. Settlement in the New World, as Kenneth Lockridge has written, produced profound unsettlement in the social structure. Emigration; the frontier; the creation of new villages, churches, governments, and codes of laws; the sheer novelty of the colonial world, all combined to distend many traditional relationships. Family and community bonds were broken and had to be built anew. Geographical and

¹³ Rutman, "The Mirror of Puritan Authority," in George A. Billias (ed.), *Law and Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Barre, MA: Barre Publishers 1965), 155.

economic mobility provided new opportunities for some people to experience more freedom from social restraint than ever before. Everywhere one looks in seventeenth-century New England, the physical details of life militated against a monolithic morality.¹⁴

At the same time that social historians began to identify some of the limits to the explanatory power of intellectual history, a new generation of intellectual historians began to challenge the work of Miller and others of his generation on its own terms. Debates have arisen over many specific propositions but the details of these debates can be conveniently grouped around three main criticisms. First, the critics charge that the Miller school was so anxious to destroy the stereotype of the fanatical pleasure-hating Puritan, that through gross overstatement it created a new equally ahistorical stereotype of the Puritans as twentieth-century moderates in their views on pleasure. When scholars write history as “corrective” lessons, of course, this type of overstatement often occurs. Second, other historians argue that Miller and his generation of intellectual historians did not fully appreciate the diversity of New England thought. They paid lip service to the concept of diversity and wrote much about the outright dissent of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, but, in the final analysis, most of the scholars of the Miller school did believe that there was a *Puritan mind* and that it could be defined by a clear set of propositions to which most New Englanders would accede. Third, historians using insights and models from psychiatrists and psychologists have suggested that the previous generation of intellectual historians failed to appreciate subconscious forces in the Puritan psyche and too readily accepted public statements at face value.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kenneth Lockridge, *Settlement and Unsettling in Early America: The Crisis of Political Legitimacy Before The Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), *passim*.

¹⁵ The secondary literature criticizing and defending Miller and his generation of historians is vast. For a few important examples see McGiffert, “American Puritan Studies,” 36–67; Andrew Delbanco, “The Puritan Errand Re-Viewed,” *Journal of American Studies*, 18 (1984), 343–60; John C. Crowell, “Perry Miller as Historian: A Bibliography of Evaluations,” *Bulletin of Bibliography and Magazine Notes*, 34 (1977), 77–85; Everett Emerson, “Perry Miller and the Historians: A Literary Scholar’s Assessment,” *History Teacher*, 14 (1981), 459–67; James Hoopes, “Art as History: Perry Miller’s *New England Mind*,” *AQ*, 34 (1982), 3–25; Francis Butts, “The Myth of Perry Miller,” *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), 665–94; Butts, “Norman Fiering and the Revision of Perry Miller,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 17 (1986), 1–25; George Marsden, “Perry Miller’s Rehabilitation of the Puritans: A Critique,” *Church History*, 39 (1970), 91–105; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). This large body of historiography is perceptively discussed in the most up-to-date analysis of it by David Hall, “On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies,” *WMQ*, 44 (1987), 193–229. Hall believes

When citing examples of overstatement and dubious interpretations of evidence, not surprisingly the critics often turn to the oldest bug-a-boo associated with the Puritans – sex. Several recent historians argue that the Puritan sermons which extolled the pleasures of sex within the marriage bed were part of the rhetorical war Protestants had with Rome. Ministers liked to remind people that they were not celibates as were Catholic priests. Celibacy was not intrinsically bad, but it was a trap that inevitably led to the horrible sexual abuses that Puritans often associated with Catholics. As one Puritan sermon said, “Ye Popish dogs at marriage bark no more.”¹⁶ In addition to procreation, the main reason for recommending marital sex was to ward off worse temptations of “inexpressible uncleannesses.” Puritans saw sexual snares everywhere, and in remarkably consistent language they associated “unrestrained sensuality” with paganism, atheism, idolatry, and blasphemy. And, this was as true for sex within marriage as for illicit sex: “intemperate adventures in bed” would lead a husband to “play the adulterer with his own wife.”¹⁷ Puritans treated sexuality in all its forms with wariness and at times even horror as a lurking “invitation to damnation.” It is true that some of Anne Bradstreet’s poems and many letters from esteemed leaders such as John Winthrop do suggest a tender, passionate sensuality within marriage.¹⁸ But as much or more of the literature from the seventeenth century suggests the terror sexuality held for many Puritans. Thomas Hooker, a minister of towering influence, wrote in a vein similar to Bradstreet’s poetry: “there is wild love and joy enough in the world, as there is wild thyme and other herbs but we would have garden love and garden joy.”¹⁹ The minister Samuel Danforth’s warning against excessive passion, however, was probably more typical than a Bradstreet or Hooker according to one recent assessment of Puritan sexuality: “Let thy lustful body be everlasting fuel for the unquenchable fire; let thy lascivious soul be eternal food for the never-dying worm. Hell from beneath is moved to meet thee.”

that the sharpest part of the criticism of the intellectual historians has “run its course” and that the gap between social and intellectual historians is narrowing. Hall, “On Common Ground,” 193–94.

¹⁶ Nicholas Noyes (1704), quoted in Kathleen Verduin, “‘Our Cursed Natures’: Sexuality and the Puritan Conscience,” *NEQ*, 56 (1983), 222–24, 229–30.

¹⁷ Zuckerman, “Pilgrims in the Wilderness,” 266.

¹⁸ Verduin, “Our Cursed Natures,” 222; Ronald Bosco, “Lectures at The Pillory: The Early American Execution Sermon,” *AQ* 30 (1978), 157.

¹⁹ Hooker quoted in Zuckerman, “Pilgrims in the Wilderness,” 266.

Although Danforth and Hooker gave sermons of contrasting emphases, both ministers operated within the limits of dissent allowed by Puritan society. Other New England divines ventured outside of the prescribed limits and offered even greater intellectual alternatives. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson are the best known but many other “radical spiritists,” as Philip Gura calls them, rejected the essentials of Puritan theology and hence the essentials of the Puritan beliefs about pleasure. Diggers, Seekers, and Ranters – some of the most well-known radical dissenters in England – had adherents in New England. Massachusetts’s moderate Puritans were challenged by members of these groups as well as by Familists, Anabaptists, Antinomians, and Quakers. Important religious dissenters such as Williams, Hutchinson, Benjamin Wheelwright, Samuel Gorton, John Clark, and William Pyncheon were not solitary figures: almost all of them had large groups of followers and secret sympathizers. Because most of these pietistic dissenters rejected the doctrine of original sin, Puritans often thought them to be near-hedonists. Not being weighed down with the inevitability of sin gave these dissenters a “faire and easie way to heaven,” Puritan theologians believed. Thomas Weld, a Puritan minister, explained the attractiveness of antinomianism: “it pleaseth nature well to have heaven and their lusts too.” “Drunken dreams of the world” and “golden dreams of heaven,” Thomas Shepard wrote to describe the theology of pietists who thought that if a believer had Grace, salvation was inevitable. Nor was Shepard wrong. The theology of most of these groups did make it possible to indulge in moral behaviour by their standards that the respectable moderate Puritans would have considered depraved. Eventually most of these groups became concentrated in Rhode Island, but they had sympathizers throughout New England, and they provided a visible example of differing patterns of behaviour and thought. When one considers that the dissenters did offer a “faire and easie way” to both heaven and life and that much of the population of New England were not full members of the Puritan church, the popularity of the “radical spiritists” and the fear they inspired in the Puritan leadership are both easy to understand.²⁰

The frequency of sexual references both negative and positive in Puritan literature suggests to many psychoanalytic historians that sex played heavily upon their subconscious thoughts. In evaluating Puritan

²⁰ This paragraph is based on Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620–1660* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 9–11, 49, 52–53, 82–85, and *passim*. See also Winston Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 150–52.

attitudes towards sexual pleasure, as in their attitudes towards any type of pleasure, scholars now realize that they must examine childhood, adolescence, child-rearing, and the developmental process by which the newborn child was transformed into the adult Puritan. Puritans may have dwelled on sexuality in published discussions of morality, but in practice parents were anything but matter-of-fact about it: in the family and in polite company, sexuality was invariably avoided as a subject of conversation. Children received instructions about sex from the sermon literature, from examples of sexual crimes being punished, and from their peers. These sources, in general, did not seem conducive to imparting what psychologists would call “healthy attitudes” towards sexual pleasure. Among adolescents, sexual conversation in seventeenth-century New England was commonplace in the same sophomoric way that it is among many young people in twentieth-century America: the banter is delightful to them because it was shocking and regarded as wrong. But, the sexual banter of the seventeenth century took place amidst patterns of childrearing that were strikingly different from those of the twentieth century.²¹ The explicit attitudes towards pleasure of the Puritan adult world must be comprehended in the context of the personality occasioned by these patterns of childrearing.

Pretending to a false certainty about the effects on the adult personality of Puritan attitudes towards childrearing would be foolish. The best of psychologists today disagree over the appropriate models of child development to use in historical analysis and the meaning that can be extracted from these models. Yet there is much that can readily be agreed upon that has reference to attitudes towards pleasure and people’s ability to experience some kinds of pleasure. By almost any standard employed today, Puritan attitudes towards childrearing were repressive. Heavy-handed childrearing practices were characteristic of most of the early modern world, but even judged by seventeenth-century standards, the Puritans were unusually harsh – we might even say psychologically brutal – in the way they prepared their children for adulthood. A frequently cited manual on childrearing published in 1628 by the English Puritan minister, John Robinson, stated: “there is in all children, though not alike, a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from their natural pride, which must in the first place be broken and beaten down; that so the foundation of their education being laid in humility and tractableness.” Original sin manifested itself without fail in the “spiritual diseases” that

²¹ Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649–1699* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 92–94.

children showed through acts of self-assertion. Robinson believed “it is natural for parents tenderly to love all their children; yet it is wisdom to conceal...their inordinate affection...from the children...as the ape is said, many times to kill her young ones by too strict embracing them. Children should not know,” he continued, “that they have a will of their own.” In addition to controlling their wills, parents were adjoined to impress upon children the full weight of their depravity. From the English Puritan background through the standard book used to teach literacy, *The New England Primer*, through the writings of almost all the esteemed New England divines, John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, Increase and Cotton Mather, a consistent message was heard. Puritans shared more of a consensus on childrearing than they did on most matters.²²

Determining what specific injuries were inflicted on the psyches of Puritan children is not as easy. Nor is it entirely clear how successful parents were in their efforts “to conceal their...inordinate affections.” At one time historians felt that the weight of Puritan repression hung so heavily that the young were deprived of a childhood nearly altogether and were expected to function as adults after the age of six. Clearly, this was not the case, and several stages of childhood including the “sturm and drang” of adolescence did exist. Similarly, parents expressed far more love for their children than an extreme application of theory would permit. Nevertheless, the philosophy and reality of childrearing and the empirical evidence from diaries, autobiographies and other literary artifacts suggest that much guilt, anxiety, and in particular, low self-esteem, were products of child development prior to the age of six. This, in turn, led children to attempt to develop adult consciousnesses to control themselves – overmanipulation, psychologists today would say – which accelerated their sense of shame between the age of six and puberty. And, then at puberty, the sum of all this guilt would create a series of taboos about the genitals and the other senses. By almost any model of analysis, the pattern was psychologically devastating and hostile to a personality development that could be comfortable experiencing joy and gratification of the senses. Thus, even if Puritan ideology and social thought explicitly told people to pursue leisure and recreation, albeit moderately, the nature

²² John Robinson, “Of Children and Their Education” (orig. pub. 1628), in Philip Greven, Jr. (ed.), *Child-Rearing Concepts, 1628–1681* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, 1973), 13, 14, 17; John Locke, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” (orig. pub.: 1690), in Greven (ed.), *Child-Rearing*, 18–41; Cotton Mather, “Some Special Points Relating to the Education of My Children” (orig. pub.: 1706), in Greven (ed.), *Child-Rearing*, 41–43.

of the socialization process made the pursuit at best ambivalent and conflicted.²³

The most essential duty thrust upon Puritan children was to prepare their souls for a religious conversion experience. In a psychological task remarkably similar to the one Freud described in which a boy has to conquer his lust for his mother – the resolution of the Oedipus Complex – or face the terrifying punishment of castration by his father, the young Puritan had to conquer sinfulness and self-love or face eternal damnation. The only successful way to do this required a young person to subordinate self-love to love for God and to introject God's standards into what psychologists call the superego. Thus, in terms of today's knowledge of child development, Puritans had well developed superegos but poorly developed egos. People with dominant superegos tend to like external rules, order, structure, and stability; and they tend to acquiesce easily to authority. They are not comfortable with individual assertions of behaviour outside of prescribed bounds and they have a great deal of trouble being spontaneous, free-spirited, and lighthearted. They often master large bodies of knowledge but tend not to be creative or playful with ideas. They have a great deal of self-loathing because, of course, they cannot completely conquer self-love and their inability to do so produces guilt and anxiety. The superego and ego obviously are not physically found anywhere in the mind or body; they are analytical tools – convenient fictions some might say – to help explain certain patterns of child development and adult behaviour that have been observed to recur in most societies. As analytical tools, however, they suggest not that Puritans believed pleasure to be wrong or inherently sinful; but that Puritanism as a collectivity had a psychological profile that made the pursuit of any self-enhancing or self-indulging pleasure emotionally conflicting.²⁴

If we accept that neither their own psyches nor the values and ideology of their society provided Puritans with a clear, unambiguous guide to the role of pleasure in their lives, it may help explain the difficulty historians

²³ Ross Beales, "In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England," *AQ*, 27 (1975), 379–82; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 127–70; Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 94–95; Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 78–80; Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 94–95.

²⁴ This paragraph is based on Murray Murphy, "The Psychodynamics of Puritan Conversion," *AQ*, 31 (1979), 141–47.

have had understanding Puritan attitudes towards leisure and recreation. The respectable Puritan mind – the body of thought sustained by the ministers and magistrates within the church’s fold – clearly contained a diverse range of views on pleasure. The unrespectable Puritan mind, those New Englanders who exceeded the limits set by the clergy of Massachusetts and Connecticut, extended this range of views on pleasure even further. Moreover, much of the rhetoric employed vague language which permitted a great deal of subjectivity in definition and application.

The intellectual debate occasioned by successive waves of scholars, each reacting to what it perceived as shortcomings in its predecessors, has added richness and detail to the picture of the Puritan views of pleasure, but not necessarily clarity. The “field work” of social historians provides some empirical substance to the picture by placing patterns of behaviour alongside patterns of thought. And the developmental analysis of the psychologists forces historians to confront the obvious fact that any assessment of attitudes towards pleasure must accept an important role for the subconscious. Taken together, all of this work means that we know a great deal more about the Puritans’ views of pleasure than Nathaniel Hawthorne did when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne appreciated and explored the complexity of human nature; he did not, however, appreciate or explore the complexity of New England society. The majority of New Englanders were not orthodox Puritans in the strictest definition of the term – full church members who had “owned the covenant.” In addition to Congregational church communicants, New England was composed of radicals, Anglicans, servants living on the margin of society, Puritans of convenience with little religious conviction, and believers in the Puritan way who did not have a conversion experience and hence did not become full church members. Historians have gained an appreciation of New England’s complexity through every exploration attempted. And, more importantly, the cumulative effect of these explorations suggests that simple questions such as the one in the title of this essay are ahistorical and elicit simplistic answers unworthy of the richness or the reality of New England’s past.