Women's Roles in Puritan Culture
Time Line

1630  • It is estimated that only 350 to 400 people are living in Plymouth Colony.

1636  • Roger Williams founds Providence Plantation (Rhode Island)
     • It is decreed that colonial Puritan women can not speak in church.

1637  • Anne Hutchinson put on trial and exiled from Massachusetts Bay Colony

1643  • United Colonies of New England is formed, one of the first notions of a collected governmental body

1649  • England becomes a Commonwealth; Oliver Cromwell made Lord Protector

1650  • Population within the colonies of Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, and New Haven total about 1,500 persons.

1652  • Providence Plantation abolishes slavery within its colony

1660  • Charles II resumes monarchy in England, eleven years after father’s execution

February 1692 / May 1693
• Witch Trials in Salem Village, Ipswich, Andover and Salem Town.
Breakdown of the New England Population:

Patricia Scott Deetz and James Deetz report in their essay, “Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606-1660,” between 1620 - 1630 roughly 350 - 400 people lived in Plymouth Colony.

- They were scattered in several small and isolated settlements.

These authors later quote Bradley Chapin who estimates that in the year 1650, among the colonies of Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, and New Haven all had a total population of about 1,500 persons.
Women’s Roles

As can be guessed, men and women had separate roles in Puritan society.

• They have in-place a hierarchal system; women served as secondary subjects to their husbands.

• In some extreme cases women were viewed intellectually beneath male-children.

• Despite the fact everyone is stained with original sin, women carry a heavier burden due to the depiction of Eve’s actions in the Garden of Eden from the Old Testament. Her actions were a corruption extended to all women.

• As of 1636 colonial Puritan women officially could not speak in church. They had to be silent throughout the service.

• Furthermore, women could not lead discussion on matters of theology—except in cases of all-female prayer groups.
Women’s Roles

• **On a positive note**, women were allowed to read scriptures.

• The Puritans believed everyone and anyone should be able to read from the books of the Bible.

• Their views of education were somewhat “progressive” in this area.

• For the Puritans, stressing the role of community and family strengthened their religious foundations. Through cooperative labor and creative work, the individual’s worth to the community heightened.

• Thus a woman served a purpose under the divine plan of the English Colonies. She embodied a portion of individuality, capable of serving God and the community effectively. (Albeit, her role was limited only to mothering and controlling household functions. Women were not allowed publicly to interpret the scriptures.)
Women’s Roles

- This system created an emphasis for “each individual’s need to study the self, the world, and the Bible so as to attain spiritual certitude and moral rectitude” (43).

- Each individual sought a purpose in life, something to demonstrate one’s worthiness and “serve both the public and the personal good. At the same time, he was to recognize his total dependence on God. Once he had done both, he was to develop the virtues of faithful labor, humility, cheerfulness, modesty, and when necessary—resignation” (1).
Massachusetts Body of Liberties

• The first code of law adopted December 10, 1641, contains approximately 94 resolutions, now known as the Massachusetts Body of Liberties. Based on the English common law, it displays the patriarchal culture’s conservative outlook towards the civil liberties of women.

• Articles 79 and 80 pertain specifically to the legal rights of women:
  79. If any man at his death shall not leave his wife a competent portion of his estate, upon just complaint made to the General Courts she shall be relieved.
  80. Every married woman shall be free from bodily correction or stripes by her husband, unless it be in his own defense upon her assault. If there be any just cause of correction, complaint shall be made to authority assembled in some court, from which only she shall receive it (166).

Women’s Roles

Women still held the status as second-class citizens.

Like the wilderness, their subjectification was divinely sanctioned for possession by mankind.

- Overall, New England stressed female ambition as sinful, using Judeo-Christian myths surrounding Eve as a supporting example.
- Women’s writing, as a result, limits itself severely during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
Anne Hutchinson

In 1637, Plymouth Colony Governor John Winthrop placed Anne Hutchinson on trial for preaching doctrine contrary to the Puritan beliefs.

• Her case was a major conflict in the settlement; generally it is agreed she fell victim to the expectations of the Puritan community surrounding the role of women in their society.

• She mainly promoted the right for women to interpret and speak their feelings regarding biblical matters. In particular, Hutchinson challenged the standard interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve. Her proposal runs counter to the notion that women are the cause of original sin; this is the cornerstone of Puritan beliefs.

• In Massachusetts she assumed the role as an unauthorized minister of a church discussion group. Originally it included only women, but a few men began attending her talks. This is where she began to become more noticed.

• Her home study group gathered as much as 80 people according to historian Robert Ellsberg.
Anne Hutchinson

- Hutchinson spoke her mind freely within the context of a male hierarchy unaccustomed to outspoken women. The extent to which she was persecuted was perhaps proportional to the threat the rulers saw in her, considering the many people who were willing to listen to and follow her and the threat that she may have posed.

- She was an avid student of the Bible which she freely interpreted in the light of what she termed her “divine inspiration.”

- She actually adhered to the principles of Puritan orthodoxy.

- However, it is the slight changes she proposed which got her in trouble—she held enormously progressive notions about the equality and rights of women, in contradiction of both Puritan and prevailing cultural attitudes.

- Perhaps her situation was more volatile to the Puritan elders: a woman preaching was more a sin than a man like Williams preaching his opposing views.
Ironically, she was lucky she avoided similar consequences of the infamous Salem Witch Trials which occurred between February 1692 and May 1693:

- over 150 people were arrested and imprisoned
- nineteen of this group were executed on the grounds of felony of witchcraft: fourteen women and five men were hanged
- one man refused to enter a plea and was crushed to death under heavy stones in an attempt to force him to do so
- at least five more of the accused died in prison

Although labelled as Salem, the trials included individuals from four small villages surrounding the Salem area.
Salem Witch Trials

To put it into a better perspective, it is important to realize the Puritans believed

- God and His angels interacted with the living world, sometimes in invisible forms, sometimes in disguised human forms.
- Likewise, Satan and his devils tried to intervene in the natural world, with illicit means. His evil nature was set on destroying the morality of the Puritan community and overthrowing their faith.

Furthermore God punished those he found sinful whenever He felt inclined:

- loss of crops
- sickness in livestock
- early death in children
- bad weather
- *all were typically examples of the wrath of God.*
Cotton Mather

A minister from Boston, Cotton Mather, wrote about the Salem trial incidents in:

*The Wonders of the Invisible World: Observations as Well Historical as Theological, upon the Nature, the Number, and the Operations of the Devils* (1693).

- A firm believer in the supposed powers of witches, in this text Mather goes to elaborate retelling of reports in the New World.
- Mather collects elaborate, diverse stories of dealings with witches and devils.
- He also documents the proper way for determining a witch (see page xxv).

One example from his research states: “If after Cursing there follow Death, or at least, some mischief: for Witches are wont to practice their mischievous Facts, by Cursing and Banning: This also is a sufficient matter of Examination, tho’ not of Conviction (xxv).
American folklorist and historian, Richard M. Dorson comments in his book *America in Legend*:

Belief in demons and witches and narratives illustrating their magical and diabolical deeds lie at the heart of folklore. The Mathers and their fellow Puritans accepted this folklore and incorporated it into their covenant theology. [However], they did not swallow wholesale the old wives’ tales and notions freely circulating among the folk, with which they were fully acquainted, but rather endeavored earnestly to screen out “superstitions” and “fabulous” elements from genuine evidences of sorcery and diabolism. The New England Puritan fathers took a median position on witchcraft lore, rejecting at one extreme the skeptics who denied the actuality of witches, and at the other the gullible who thought witches could transform themselves into beasts and birds (32).

Cotton Mather

Dorson contends that numerous factors helped play into the witch hysteria in New England. Most notably:

- The Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692 lost their charter; in England politicians in power unified the developing colonies into one charter
- With the new charter, voting rights extended beyond the average Puritan freeman; criticism from Parliament towards leadership in Mass. Bay Colony was increasing
- Relations with the Native Americans was never constant; the threat of attacks increased with each new year
- Satan’s forces existed in many forms within the wilderness
Mather’s interpretation of the Puritan plain style is not standard of his father’s generation. Various writers held different perspectives of the technique, with diverse results.

- Due to the intensity of his topic, Mather allows a stronger persuasive voice to be mixed in with his rhetoric.
- Likewise, he often avoids simplistic phrases for a more ornate, emotional sentence, creating a strong didactic tone, and in a sense, using exhortations in order to show the violence, irrational behavior of the convicted witches.
- In contrast, in some cases Mather also promotes the glory of God to balance against the horrors of the heathen masses.
Cotton Mather

From *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, he writes:

These Witches, whereof above a Score have now Confessed, and shown their Deeds, and some are now Tormented by the Devils, for Confessing, have met in Hellish Randezvouzes, wherein the Confessors do say, they have had their Diabolical Sacraments, imitating the Baptism and the Supper of our Lord. In these Hellish Meetings, these Monsters have associated themselves to do no less a Thing than, To Destroy the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, in these parts of the World; and in order hereunto, First, they each of them have their Spectres, or Devils, Commission’d by them, and Representing of them, to be the Engines of their Malice. By these wicked Spectres, they Siege poor people about the Country, with Various and bloody Torments; and of those Evidently Preternatural Torments there are some have Dy’d. They have bewitched some, even so far as to make them Self-Destroyers: and others are in many Towns here and there Languishing under their Evil Hands. The People thus Afflicted, are miserably Scratched and Bitten, so that the Marks are most Visible to all the World, but the causes utterly Invisible; and the same Invisible Furies do most Visibly stick Pins into the Bodies of the Afflicted, and Scald them, & hideously Distort, and Disjoint all their members, besides a thousand other sorts of Plagues beyond these of any Natural Diseases which they give unto them (37).