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## Brad Crandell Homosexuality in Puritan New England

In the early Puritan colonies, the mere concept of homosexuality struck horror into the hearts of good, God-fearing men. Many thought that homosexuality was an impurity that could spread and eventually call down the fire and brimstone that was showered on Sodom and Gomorrah. In order to preserve the sanctity of the Puritan culture, to assure that their New Jerusalem did not turn into a New Sodom, the Puritans prescribed the death penalty for all homosexual offenses. This penalty was also applied to other sex crimes such as rape and adultery. But homosexuality was considered "farre more abominable than adultery..., the most abominable unnaturelle sinne" (Hibler 61). Although the penalty was harsh, it was rarely implemented. Why, in a society whose language illustrated great fear and disgust towards homosexuality, were so few homosexuals tried in court and even fewer executed? Did the Puritans become tolerant of homosexuality? Or were homosexual encounters so frequent and common that the Puritan leaders decided to turn their heads and look the other way? I believe that the Puritan disgust for homosexuality was never as much internal as it was produced by the church in order to raise confidence in Puritan righteousness.

The attitude throughout the seventeenth century was never acceptance of homosexuality. Nowhere can we find a Puritan sermon proclaiming that a congregation should accept and support the homosexuals in the community. Rather, many written works focused on purging the community and the self of these abominations. Thomas Cobbert's <a href="Fruitful Discourse">Fruitful Discourse</a>, Samuel Danforth's <a href="Cry of Sodom">Cry of Sodom</a>, and Michael Wigglesworth's <a href="Day of Doom">Day of Doom</a> all focused on ridding the world of homosexual activity. The Mathers also wrote quite a few works on the subject. Cotton Mather's <a href="Addresses to Old Men, Young Men, and Children">Addresses to Old Men, Young Men, and Children</a>, <a href="The Pure Nazarite">The Pure Nazarite</a>, <a href="Pillars of Salt">Pillars of Salt</a>, <a href="The The Sailour's Companion">The Pure Nazarite</a>, <a href="Pillars of Salt">Pillars of Salt</a>, <a href="The The Sailour's Companion">The Sailour's Companion</a>, and Increase Mather's <a href="Solemn Advice to Young Men">Solemn Advice to Young Men</a> were all at least in part intended to cure New England of the pollution caused by homosexuality (Thompson 32). These works drew on a few lines in the Old Testament to back up this fear of homosexuality.

Since church and state were synonymous in Puritan New England, the laws shared the same source and portrayed much of the same fear. These laws were derived from the Old Testament chapters of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Judges. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 call for the deaths of men who engage in homosexual activity. Most of the Puritan laws adhered strictly to the Bible's wording insofar as only homosexual men were subject to severe punishment. Female homosexuality was excluded in most cases. Of course there is always at least one exception. John Cotton demanded that female homosexuality be included as a capital crime. He proposed it in a legal code in Massachusetts in 1636, but the code was not accepted. His code was adopted in the colony of New Haven in 1655 but was dropped again in 1665 when Connecticut annexed New Haven (Oaks 269). Aside from this exception, all of the legal codes that punished same-sex relationships with death applied to men only. The Massachusetts legal code of 1648 excluded homosexual boys under the age of fourteen from capital punishment. It made a note, however, that the boys were to be severely punished instead (Farrand 35).

Although the laws demanded capital punishment as the penalty for adult homosexuality, many magistrates opted to hand down lighter sentences in most cases. In fact, there was only one recorded execution of a criminal of this sort. William Plaine was executed in New Haven in 1646 for "uncleane practices." He was charged with "corrupt[ing]

a great part of the youth . . . by masturbation, which he had committed and provoked others to the like above a hundred times" (Winthrop 324). It is likely, however, that Plaine's atheistic views, which he expressed freely, contributed to the magistrate's ruling for execution (Oaks 273).

Other cases of adult homosexuality yielded much lighter sentences resembling those of boys. The first recorded trial ever for homosexuality in New England resulted in two non-capital sentences. John Alexander and Thomas Roberts were "found guilty of lude behaviour and uncleane carriage one [with] another, by often spending their seede one upon another" (Records of the Colony of New Plymouth 1.64). This case held all of the elements for conviction. There was a witness, and each of the young men confessed to the act. If the law books had been followed to the word, these two would have been eligible for the death penalty, yet for some reason the magistrate gave them a lighter sentence. Alexander was sentenced to a whipping, was burned on the shoulder, and then was banished from the colony. Roberts was also whipped, and being an indentured servant, he was returned to his master. In addition, Roberts was banned from ever owning land in the colony (Oaks 269).

Another case of homosexuality involved Edward Preston and Edward Michell. The two were caught in "lude and sodomiticall practices" (Records 1.137). Again, the evidence was clearly against them. Each person also had a history of sex crimes. Preston had propositioned sodomy to John Keene at an earlier date. Michell had been found guilty of having illicit heterosexual sex prior to this event also. The sentence for these two was lighter than that of Alexander and Roberts mentioned above. Preston and Michell each received two whippings. They were whipped once in Plymouth and once in Barnstable. These penalties were nearly identical to those for heterosexual sex crimes such as fornication (Oaks 270).

In all there were very few convictions for homosexuality. Plymouth held the record for the most documented sex crimes in Puritan New England with a total of 151 sex crimes. Only three of these were definitely homosexual. Another sixteen were possibly homosexual. Some homosexual cases may have been tried under different charges such as "lewd carriage" or "disorderly living." It is difficult to discern whether these cases were homosexual or heterosexual charges. Often, one party is not mentioned by name or gender, confounding attempts to discern the nature of the charge. One man, for instance, was charged with "entertaining another man's servants." There is no mention of who the servants were, male or female. It is not likely that all of these cases were homosexual. Even with the most generous reading, there are only 19 possible counts of homosexuality in Plymouth (Oaks 271).

Cases in Massachusetts records are even more rare. Massachusetts records mention only four cases which involved homosexuality. One occurred aboard a ship bound for Massachusetts from England. The boys involved were simply sent back to England to be tried there. Two of the cases turned out to be falsified accounts and the slanderer was punished. The fourth case seemed to be a legitimate case, but never ended up making it to trial. It mysteriously disappeared. In fact, homosexual trials are absent from the record across the rest of New England as well (Thompson 28).

That means that throughout all of Puritan New England and over a span of 64 years (the legal code outlawing homosexuality was adopted in 1636) there were a total of only

nineteen possible homosexual trials. Could so much fear arise in the clergy and statesmen from such an infrequent act? We can presume that more homosexual activity occurred than that represented by the court records. Plymouth's Governor Bradford spoke of the appalling number of sex crimes, not only heterosexual, "But that which is even worse, even sodomy and buggery (things fearful to name) have broke forth in this land oftener than once" (Bradford 316-317). This suggests that not only was homosexuality more widespread, but it was also not necessarily a secret. This leads me back to one of my original questions. If homosexuality caused such a furor and was the topic of so many sermons, why was it that so few people were actually tried, fewer convicted, and even fewer executed? Did the Puritans quit believing in the death penalty? This is unlikely because the execution rate for those convicted of bestiality stayed constant throughout the whole period: almost all offenders were killed.

One plausible explanation is that fewer were executed because homosexual encounters were more common and possibly were common knowledge. People would find it difficult to put someone else to death for an offense which someone they knew or possibly they themselves had previously committed. It is likely, for instance, that on the frontier a great many men participated in homosexual activity (Thompson 30). Frontiersmen were voluntarily isolated for long periods of time away from women in all-male communities. Homosexuality may have been situational for some, a result of a lack of heterosexual activity. Others may have chosen to be in such situations. For them, homosexuality may have been a preference as it was with pirates in the West Indies later in the century (Oaks 269).

The frontier was not the only place that an all-male environment existed. Schools were also usually all-male institutions. Thomas Shepard, a very influential and sometimes feared minister, wrote in his diary that he had homosexual experiences while away at school. "I was once or twice dead drunk and lived in unnatural uncleanness not to be named and in speculative wantonness and filthiness" (McGiffert 72).

These men who experienced homosexuality were brothers, uncles, sons, or friends of the magistrates, ministers, and outstanding members of the community back home. This could definitely put a magistrate in a dilemma of hypocrisy: attempting to judge one person based on homosexuality when he knew someone close to him could very well be guilty too.

This is a plausible explanation, but it is not my preferred explanation. I propose the theory that homosexuality laws were simply one of many tools used by the theocratic government to try to keep its "City on the Hill" from an inevitable decline. Note that the laws were put into effect shortly before Puritan society began to decline. Their goal was not necessarily to keep New England clean of homosexuality, but to keep it pure from contamination by non-Puritan ideals. William Plaine, the only colonist to be executed under this code, remember, was an atheist who expressed his views freely. To a weakening Puritan church, a man who proclaimed that God was a farce was more threatening than homosexuality alone. The rest of the people charged under this law engaged in undesirable sexual activity, but because they believed in God, they received lighter penalties.

The issue of homosexuality was used as a tool for propaganda as well. The Puritans accused the Quakers of being a society that harbored homosexuality because the Quakers had long hair. Long hair, to the Puritans, was a sign of effeminacy. The Puritans

considered effeminacy, although not equivalent to homosexuality, to be on the road to homosexuality. Some of the Puritans wrote books about their hatred for long hair. William Prynne wrote Of the Unloveliness of Lovelocks and A Gag for the Long-Haired Rattlebeads (Thompson 35). The Puritans accused other faiths of homosexuality to argue that God loved Puritans more than anyone else.

The Quakers weren't the only target of anti-homosexual propaganda. It was also pointed at the loathed Anglicans. The Puritans had been tormented by Anglicans previously, and a group of Puritans were planning to impeach the Anglican archbishop. As propaganda for this cause, John White put together a book called <u>The First Century of Scandalous Malignant Priests</u>. In this book he sought to defame the Anglican church, so he wrote about one hundred of the church's scandalous priests (Thompson 32). It is curious that the first priest mentioned was a homosexual. It may be a coincidence, but more likely White hoped to increase the disgust generated towards homosexuality by Puritan sermons.

In conclusion, I believe, as Ben Franklin did, that the purpose of the Puritan church was not to make a better world or even a better group of people, but instead Puritanism existed merely to perpetuate itself. I think that the reason there were so few executions and formal trials for homosexuality was that the ministers and magistrates did not really care about homosexuality as much as we believe they did. The laws against homosexuality were utilized only when it was convenient and when the church was starting to lose control of its members. I speculate that after a trial for homosexuality, the rest of the community members would rally around their own righteousness and heterosexuality (whether real or imagined) and would repress any of their own homosexuality. This would pull them closer together, and they would feel closer to God and therefore to the church. This was perfect for a government that was controlled by the church. The church used the anti-homosexual campaign merely as a propagandizing device. So although we often believe that the Puritans held strong convictions against homosexuality, I believe that is not necessarily true. Puritan purity is merely a myth which is carried down to the present.

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