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# “Instruments of Seduction”: A Tale of Two Women

Sandra F. VanBurkleo

**A**nn Hibbens and Anne Hutchinson had much in common. Both hailed from the Puritan hotbed of Lincolnshire, England, where they had married successful merchants before emigrating to New Boston, in 1630 and 1634 respectively. Within a few years, both women stood in the dock, charged with committing crimes against the community and entertaining diabolical religious ideas. And both women lost their contests with government. At issue were Puritan teachings about “godly relations” between husband and wife, minister and church member, and magistrate and subject. In trials of Hibbens, Hutchinson (1), and other “headstrong” women, judicial decisions about whether or not to allow important procedural and substantive freedoms partly depended upon which aspect of Calvinism’s two-sided vision of woman held sway at particular moments in the proceeding. On one side, women were potential Saints equal to men in God’s eyes; on the other side, they were Eve-like temptresses, peculiarly susceptible to Satanic temptation. In addition, Puritan responses to fallen or treacherous women in courtrooms lay bare the essential masculin-

ity of many freedoms—among them, the right to command one’s own body, the right of locomotion, liberty of speech (especially in public), the right to bring witnesses and otherwise engage in self-defense, and the privilege against self-incrimination.

The facts in the two cases differ. The charismatic teacher and spiritist Anne Hutchinson had been admitted in 1635 to the Reverend John Wilson’s First Church of Boston, over the objections of several ministers who suspected her of Antinomianism—a belief in the primacy of divine revelation and related skepticism about the authority of clergy and Biblical law. With the encouragement of Governor Harry Vane, the radical theologian John Cotton (her spiritual mentor), and the Reverend John Wheelwright (her intemperate and impolitic brother-in-law), Hutchinson began to hold women’s meetings at home. Such meetings were common enough among English gentlewomen, and (contrary to myth) did *not* involve promiscuous mingling of the sexes; instead—and more damagingly—Hutchinson summarized and explicated Biblical texts and criticized sermons, notably Wil-

son’s, encouraging women to subject ministers, husbands, and other lawgivers to criticism.

The heyday of Hutchinson’s meetings coincided with a colony-wide revival and expansion of church rolls. When spiritual malaise replaced euphoria in 1636, Cotton (2) began castigating other ministers for their abandonment, solely to attract new members, of the “covenant of grace” in favor of a “covenant of works.” Hutchinson, who agreed with Cotton and had Vane’s ear, emerged as the mainspring of a faction pitted against Wilson’s ministry and the political ambitions of John Winthrop. Hutchinson and her followers began walking out of church during sermons; throughout the colony, women rose in mid-service to heckle pastors or to dispute theological points.

In Anglo-America, these were shocking developments: public oratory by women violated both law and custom. Anglican lecturers regularly enjoined women to “obey husbands,” to “cease from commanding,” and to avoid what Amy Schrager Lang calls “female authorship.” The influential English scholar Thomas Hooker per-

mitted public speeches by women only when they supported “*subjection*.” And, while Puritans expanded women’s sphere to include family governance and church membership, they had qualms about female voices in public spaces. Scholars and preachers hoped to preserve “an inequality in the degree of ... Authority” so that, when push came to shove, husbands might retain “a *Superiority*.” Puritan historian Edward Johnson averred that only “silly women laden with diverse lusts and phantastical madness” pursued rhetoric and theology. After the Antinomian crisis, John Cotton similarly proscribed female oratory unless women had in mind “singing forth the praises of the Lord” or confessing crime. Speech “by way of teaching” or “propounding questions ... under pretence of a desire to learn,” he said, usurped male prerogatives and unsettled the polity.

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Hutchinson’s moment in the sun was fleeting: in mid-1636, the political tides began to turn against the Vane faction. Pretending friendship, Wilson and other clerics visited Hutchinson’s home in December, 1636, ostensibly to discuss religion (by Puritan lights, a “private” conversation ordinarily off limits to public scrutiny). Hutchinson spoke freely; Wilson surreptitiously took notes from which record the group compiled a list of doctrinal “errors.”

Some weeks later, at John Cotton’s invitation, John Wheelwright (3) preached an incendiary fast-day sermon in which, to Cotton’s horror, he condemned every minister except his host for practicing a covenant of works, and

called for open warfare against Satan’s allies in Bay Colony meetinghouses. His jeremiad revealed, among other things, the ongoing vitality of associations between Woman and the Anti-Christ. Wheelwright said Christians welcomed battles between “Gods people and those that are not”; everyone knew “that the whore [or false church] must be burnt... [I]t is not shaving of her head and paring her nayles and changing her rayment, that will serve ... but this whore must be burnt.”

Fearing rebellion, the General Court confiscated firearms from suspected Wheelwright supporters, who in turn circulated a remonstrance (signed by Wheelwright’s friends) threatening an appeal to royal courts. Four months later, Winthrop won the governorship and Vane fled to London. In March, 1637, magistrates commenced proceedings against Wheelwright, Hutchinson, and other minor players in the drama. Convicted of sedition, Wheelwright was exiled, though he returned after a decent interval to preach at Harvard. Significantly, the evidence used against him was a matter of public record (i.e., the contents of a sermon and written, signed remonstrance); magistrates extended a long list of procedural rights at trial—among them, the right to offer witnesses and testimony in self-defense, and the right to be silent.

His sister-in-law fared less well. In September, at an open meeting in Newport, a church-state synod examined Hutchinson, in keeping with English procedure, for evidence of sedition, heresy, blasphemy, and other crimes against authority. Unlike her kinsman, she had never occupied a pulpit, and had neither inspired nor signed petitions. Her crimes—the sowing of rebellious seeds among women, for example—occurred entirely behind the walls of a frame house.

Pregnant and faint, Hutchinson faced three rows of hostile questioners—civil magistrates, elected deputies, and clergy. In Winthrop’s words, she had “troubled the peace of the

commonwealth” and “spoken divers things ... prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers thereof.” She had “maintained a meeting and an assembly” in her home—“a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God” nor “fitting” for her sex. Despite criticism, she had persisted; the court hoped to “understand how things are” and “reduce” her (i.e., force her to acknowledge error). Failing that, she would be condemned for “obstinance.”

For a time, Hutchinson prevailed, ably challenging the court’s questionable use of evidence taken privately, the curious absence of a criminal charge, the judges’ related refusal to let her examine Wilson’s notebooks in advance of trial, and their refusal to administer oaths to witnesses (which they technically did not *have* to do, so long as the proceeding still could be termed a magisterial examination and not a trial). Familiar with Biblical law and common law procedure, she saw clearly how weak the governor’s case really was. Winthrop, after all, had no hard evidence of sedition—by definition a crime involving public acts—and flimsy evidence of heresy, some of which tended to implicate John Cotton. She had not signed the Wheelwright petition, had criticized ministers at *home*, and had spoken with Wilson as one speaks with “friends.” As she put it, Puritans respected private exchanges and “matter(s) of conscience.” Nobody came forward to secure liberties for Hutchinson; but, because she managed to assert rights claims accurately and persuasively, the magistrates acceded to her procedural demands.

Gradually, however, Hutchinson lost ground. The focus began to shift from specific theological points to “natural” relations between the sexes, and especially to Hutchinson’s alleged violations of the Fifth Commandment and usurpations of male prerogatives. More than once, magistrates reminded her that men need not “discourse” with women—that men need not *hear* what women said as to “facts” or “truth” in

self-defense. Winthrop also gained important leverage in the control of Hutchinson's body (e.g., ordering her to stop speaking, to sit while standing, to stand while sitting). A woman could never "call a company together" to preach, he said, nor offer testimony without judicial dispensation. Why had Hutchinson failed to teach young women to "love their husbands and not to make them clash?" Why had she not learned the lesson herself? Surely her meetings, so "prejudicial to the state," led to "families — neglected" by wives who had come to believe, with their teacher, that "the fear of man, is a snare." Domestic sabotage weakened all of political society: as one minister later explained, God chose *not* to create church and state "at one stroke," but to lay "foundations both of State and Church, in a family," the "Mother Hive" from which church and state "issued forth." To attack this "little commonwealth" was to assail political government. For this reason, the court declared Wilson's notebooks a lawful source of evidence: when women attacked the polity at its foundation, confidences "counted for nothing," and private utterances could support charges of sedition (or other "public" crimes). In addition, magistrates imposed banishment instead of censure, against the letter of Bay Colony law.

Because she had been demonized, Hutchinson's decision to tell the truth and be done with it returned to haunt her. She freely described her gift of prophecy, her doctrinal positions, and the content of divine messages; she claimed a God-given ability to distinguish between true and false voices. Sensing an opportunity to gather *public* evidence of heresy, magistrates asked her to say exactly how God communicated with her. "By an immediate voice," she replied truthfully. For good measure, she reminded her accusers that, because Jesus alone controlled her "body and soul," the court could do her no harm, and instead would bring a "curse upon ... posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

Magistrates no doubt breathed a sigh of relief: the "American Jezebel" (as she came to be called) had admitted antinomianism before dozens of witnesses. So long as she refused to recant errors in a separate church trial, they would be rid of her.

Jailed in a private home for the winter, Hutchinson's health steadily declined. John Wilson officiated at the proceeding in March, 1638. There, the congregation would judge whether or not she had violated the First Church covenant by which Saints agreed to "walke in all sincere Conformity" with God's law as interpreted by the clergy. If guilty and unrepentant, she would be excommunicated as well as exiled. Hutchinson was too weak to attend opening sessions, where elders presented yet more evidence "taken from her owne Mouth" over the winter by seeming friends and at least one ex-disciple. As earlier, she had no knowledge of the evidence to be used against her. Because she claimed to be ruled exclusively by God and not by her husband or the clergy, several elders accused her of several obscure heresies and—more damning—of sympathy with Familism (the notorious "family of love" sect in which members collectively married Jesus and dispensed with ordinary matrimony) (4). Hutchinson stoutly denied these charges and recanted several "errors," on the ground that human language garbled God's "true" messages (which came to her *without* language) when she tried to put them into words.

On another day, in another court, recantation might have saved her from severe punishment; but this was not such a day. At one particularly delicate moment, a critic determined to portray Hutchinson as a viper in society's bosom abruptly interjected more talk about "that foule, groce, filthye, and abominable opinion held by Familists, of the Communitie of Weomen." Would she dispense altogether with patriarchal marriages? Cotton reminded parishioners that, while Hutchinson had done "much good," she was

"but a Woman and many unsound and dayngerous principles are held by her." Did she not threaten the "very foundation of Religion" with the "filthie Sinne of the Communitie of Woemen and all promisc[uou]s and filthie cominge together of men and Woemen without Distinction or Relation of marriage?" He even accused her of marital infidelity on the ground that Familism always led there.

At closing sessions some days later, Wilson presented a longer list of "errors," some compiled by embittered ex-disciples over the winter. Weakened by pregnancy and long detention, Hutchinson said little; in any case, theology had ceased to be the issue. She had been reconstituted as the "whore of Babylon," charged with violations of Puritan relational ideology, and tarred with Familism, the heresy for which Quakers could be hanged in Massachusetts Bay. One of the elders summarized charges: "[Y]ou have stept out of your place," he said, "you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer, and a Magistrate than a Subject." Wilson called her a "dayngerous Instrument of the Divell." Said others, the "Misgovernement of this Woman's tongue" by her husband and other natural rulers portended grave "Disorder." When members objected again to punishment for conscience, Cotton found biblical authority to exile her for perjury, blasphemy, and spiritual "seduction." The writ of excommunication ordered her to leave the parish "as a Leper"; because she "dispised and contemned the Holy Ordinances," she should not "benefit by them."

Hutchinson walked out of church, followed by family members and her friend Mary Dyer (executed in 1660 for Quakerism). In March, 1638, she joined William Hutchinson in Rhode Island, where she experienced what Winthrop soberly termed a "monstrous birth"—in his view, providential evidence of grotesque theology, a "confession" that cast additional doubt upon the woman's own words. The governor noted, too, that Dyer's

“familiarity with the devill” earlier had produced a stillborn “monstrous” child, which Hutchinson and Dyer had labored to conceal; both women were unnatural, poisonous, perhaps demonic. Indeed, Winthrop wondered whether or not his old nemesis had been a witch all along. In 1639, church elders (including Ann Hibbens’ husband, William) visited Rhode Island to check on the progress of censured members. Hutchinson slammed the door in their faces. She wanted no part of their church, for she was an ecstatic “spouse of Christ.” Disconcerted visitors pronounced her a “Harlot,” begging the church to “cut her off” once and for all. Wilson gladly obliged.

The tale’s end fit neatly into the narrative Winthrop later constructed to justify Hutchinson’s exile. In the early 1640’s, she moved to New York to find “peace.” There, Indians killed the entire Hutchinson family except one child. Surely her assailants had been godly messengers: “I never heard that the Indians ... did ever before this, commit the like outrage,” wrote Winthrop. God had made of “this wofull woman” a “heavie example of their cruelty,” and confirmed the diabolical nature of her theology.

Meanwhile, Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic had closed ranks, ruling out female ministries and antinomian experimentation. John Brinsley’s 1645 sermon in Yarmouth, England, contained a typical announcement of the Puritan decision against woman preachers: “Sure we are,” he said, “that ... Women may not teach in publick. And were there no other Reason for it, this alone might be sufficient to silent them. The woman by her taking upon her to teach ... became the Instrument of Seduction, and Author of Transgression to her husband, and consequently of ruine to him....Henceforth then no more Women-Preachers.” For women to assume “the office of Teaching,” he added, was “no less than a mingling of Heaven and earth together, an inversion of the course and order of nature” (5).

Ann Hibbens, by contrast, did not claim to be a prophet. No sooner had she sailed into Boston harbor than she developed a reputation for “natural crabbedness of ... temper” and squabbling with neighbors (6). But serious trouble awaited 1640, when she locked horns with a joiner (or carpenter) who raised his price after building a fancy bedstead. Hibbens not only disputed the worker’s claim and investigated prices charged by other joiners, but also interrogated laborers in neighboring towns and rejected the mediating efforts of another craftsman. Says historian Jane Kamensky, Hibbens “spoke as a woman trying to participate in a rational society with a developing economy; prices, value, and collusion, not inspiration and revelation, were her province.” But, after the Hutchinson debacle, wives did business and exhibited a “restless tongue” at some peril. While Puritans despised hustling and gouging, they also hated scolds; in Hibbens’ case, they punished the “medium, not the message” (7).

In the autumn of 1640, the First Church commenced a magisterial examination of Hibbens, initially to ferret out evidence of “lying” about her fellows (a felony in Massachusetts); they probably sought evidence as well of scolding (a sex-specific crime punished with a dunking). The trigger had been her seemingly arrogant rejection of a male mediator and related decision to singlehandedly undertake a market survey on horseback. Judges charged Hibbens with laying “infamy, disgrace, and reproach” on the carpenter (“our Brother”). As with Hutchinson, charges multiplied to include neglect of “natural” relations between women and their male “heads.”

As in Hutchinson’s case, Hibbens refused to submit to false authority; Unlike her forebear, she preferred to *withhold* speech whenever the court demanded testimony, to stand when the court bade her sit, and to smile maddeningly at her accusers. Finally driven to distraction, the magistrates condemned her arrogance and especially her “carriage ... so proud and contemptuous and irreverent ... when

the church is dealing with her.” Through a “Brother,” Hibbens sardonically told her accusers that she dared not respond to queries in church because God required silence of women.

Also as with Hutchinson, Hibbens’s accusers fastened upon ungodly relations—her unwomanly violations of “the rule of the Apostle in usurping authority over him whom God hath made her head and husband,” and her anti-Christian decision to take “the power and authority which God hath given to him out of his hands.” William had accepted the joiner’s price; Ann’s insistence that she could “manage it better than her husband” constituted a “plan breach of the rule of Christ,” and by implication an indictment of Hibbens’ husband for failing to govern his wife. Judges toyed with the possibility that her ability to rile up the neighborhood evidenced witchcraft; but, in 1640, they settled for admonition and (when she refused to disavow “lusts and covetous distempers”) excommunication. The pastor stated that Hibbens merited damnation for “slandering and raising up an evil report of ... Brethren,” for the “sowing of discord,” and for refusing to remain at home. She had, after all, dashed “with a restless and discontented spirit ... from person to person from house to house, and from place to place.” She had rejected governance by the “wise ... head” of her husband, usurped his prerogatives, and “grieved his spirit.” Has she not behaved “as if he was a nobody,” rejected “the way of obedience,” and encouraged “unquietness of the family”? With Hutchinson, Hibbens had little time for “due submission.” Unlike her predecessor, she celebrated the commercial spirit and ignored theology—impulse which profoundly troubled her interrogators.

Hibbens vanished from public view until 1654 when her well-respected husband died. One historian thinks that, without his protection, she no longer could fend off the “full weight of her neighbors’ hatred” (8). In 1655, the General Court convicted her of witchcraft, but magistrates refused the verdict and ordered a new trial, where jurors again condemned her. In mid-1656, Massachusetts executed

Hibbens as a witch, for being “turbulent in her passion, and discontented,” and possessed of a “strange carriage.” Years later, a witness to the spectacle told Puritan minister Increase Mather that she had been hanged “for having more wit than her neighbors.” She had “guessed that two of her persecutors, whom she saw talking in the street, were talking of her; which, proving true, cost her life.”

The trials of Hutchinson and Hibbens—and analogous ordeals to which colonial magistrates subjected other female spiritist and malcontents—lay bare the extent to which gender shaped access to important freedoms, particularly when women threatened to destabilize the “Yoke-fellowship” that governed Puritan families. A reputation for self-sovereignty clearly diminished a woman’s liberty prospects. The die was cast when Hutchinson rose to defend herself as God’s instrument, immune to the slings and arrows of mere men. Hibbens similarly tossed freedom to the wind when she refused to let magistrates control her body, mind, and tongue. Submissiveness guaranteed nothing, but unruly or aggressive women triggered fears of the Anti-Christ. Puritan divine William Perkins suggested that, in certain cases, and never in cases of witchcraft, women’s “weakness” might “lessen both the crime and the punishment”; unruliness or aggression ensured the opposite result. Mercy Brown of Wallingford Massachusetts, escaped the gallows in 1691 after killing her son; however, judges delayed passing sentence because she was “distracted,” and finally jailed her. By contrast, Dorothy Talbye of Salem (hanged for child murder) resisted authority, refused to confess until threatened with torture, sat when ordered to stand, and rejected a facecloth at the gallows. Defiance increased the odds of unmitigated punishment, and often lent credence to suspicions of witchcraft (9).

Comparisons with state trials of men are telling. Magistrates, to give one example, did not interpret Wheelwright’s

silence as guilt, because regular male ministers (unlike lay female ministers) could be counted on to tell the truth in public and elsewhere, and also because his crime, while heinous, did not weaken political society at its foundation. Anne Hutchinson’s brother-in-law brought witnesses on his own behalf, offered testimony for jurors’ consideration, and retained sovereign command of his own body. Both Hutchinson and Hibbens confronted judges determined to police their movements and utterances better than husbands had done, and to extract confessions or damning testimony, because they acted from and upon the domestic “Hive.” Ann Hibbens’s mocking silence bought her a one-way ticket to the gallows; Hutchinson’s eleventh-hour recantations at the church trial (which might have saved her, had critics not identified her with Satan) ultimately were used against her, as evidence of bizarre theology and *lying* at the civil trial. For women accused of treachery, public displays of courage, honesty, erudition, and physical autonomy were altogether foolhardy.

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## Endnotes

1. For a fuller version of the Hutchinson tale, additional bibliography, and citations to material quoted here, see Sandra F. VanBurkleo, “‘To Bee Rooted Out of Her Station’: The Ordeal of Anne Hutchinson,” in *American Political Trials*, ed. Michal Belknap, rev. ed. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), 1–24, which in turn relies upon David Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, 2d ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).
2. Reverend Richard Allestree, quoted in Alice E. Natahews, “Religious Experience of Southern Women,” and John Cotton, “Singing of Psalms a Gospel-Ordinance, 1650,” in *Women and Religion in America*,

ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, vol. 2 (New York, 1983), 191–192, 206; Amy Schrager Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3; Hooker and Cotton quoted in David Leverenz, *Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Literature, Psychology, and Social History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 82; and Edward Johnson quoted in Edgar McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 199–220.

3. John Wheelwright, “Fast-Day Sermon,” in Hall, 158–170.
4. See Christopher W. Marsh, *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550–1630* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
5. Sermon of Reverend John Brinsely, quoted in Rosemary Skinner Keller, “New England Women: Ideology and Experience in First-Generation Puritanism (1630–1650),” in Ruether and Keller, 189.
6. “[Governor] Thomas Hutchinson on Ann Hibbens [sic],” *Witchhunting in Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David Hall (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 91.
7. [Robert Keayne], “Proceedings of Excommunication against Mistress Ann Hibbens of Boston (1640),” in *Remarkable Providences*, ed. John Demos, rev. ed. (Boston 1991), 262; Jane Kamensky, “Governing the Tongue: Speech and Society in Early New England,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993), 220. The account of Hibbens’s ordeal derives from Demos’s transcription supplemented by Hall, *Witchhunting*, 91.
8. Hall, *Witchhunting*, 91.
9. William Perkins, “Discourse on the Damned Art of Witchcraft,” (1592) in Ruether and Keller, 154; McManus, 105; Peter Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1558–1803* (New York, 1984), 40–1.

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