

Enlightened Sinner or Hopeless Heathen: Typology and the Role of Native Americans in Puritan Literature and Theology

by Alexis M. Milmine

Puritan literature and theology emphasized the use of typology and jeremiad to facilitate and further the evangelicalism and piety of the community members in the New World. In "The Traditions of Puritan Typology," Thomas M. Davis notes the Puritan use of typology is an evolution of the early Christian practice wherein "the Puritan experiment in New England and the most central points of its theology were based too fully on the Old Testament to discard a traditional method of exegesis which provided impeccable biblical authority for the New England Way."¹ The reliance on typology and jeremiad sermon format worked at a rhetorical level to organize the religious thought of the New England Puritan community and as a pathway to explaining the signs and wonders of the New World.

The Puritan use of typology and the jeremiad evolved to fit the new problems that these settlers encountered in Massachusetts and their worldview, both secular and spiritual, informed their attitudes about their fellow inhabitants in the New World. The Puritans' attitudes about their relationship with the Native Americans not only varied by group and generation, but also evolved through their typological view of the world and their Christian faith. The Native Americans have an amorphous and contradictory place within Puritan typology and jeremiad, revealing the changing attitude about their place in an English society. The Puritan literature surrounding these relationships reveals the uneasy attitude the

¹ Thomas M. Davis, "The Traditions of Puritan Typology," in *Typology and Early American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 13.

Puritans possessed in terms of the Native Americans' place in the theological construct of the new community of the elect.

In order to fully understand the implications and role of the Native Americans on the Puritan religious mindset, an explication of the terms typology and jeremiad are necessary. Typology is based on an ancient hermeneutic methodology in which "the routine clerical explications of the fulfillment of Old Testament types in the New Testament antitypes . . . established a mode of symbolic expression."² The Puritan utilization of typology refigures the events in the Old and New Testaments to the Puritan experience in their tribulations and settlement in New England. The jeremiad form of sermons becomes uniquely linked to the early Puritan rhetorical flourishes in order to compel appropriate religious behavior in the New World. These sermons took "their texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah, [and] these orations followed — and re-inscribed — a rhetorical formula that included recalling the courage and piety [.] . . . lamenting recent and present ills, and crying out for a return to the original conduct and zeal."³ Both Sacvan Bercovitch and Perry Miller argue that the jeremiad was both a warning and a comfort to the first generation Puritans in New England because it worked to check both sinful behavior and overzealousness within the religious community.⁴

William Bradford, one of the first leaders of the Puritan community in Massachusetts, noted both the difficulties and providences that God allowed among his people in the New World. The tumultuous history surrounding the trip to New England is fraught with typological images and he further delineates meaning when examining his attitudes toward the Native American population in close contact with the English settlers. Every event in their early history, chronicled in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, is a type linked to the tales of the Old Testament. The purpose of Bradford writing down both the history of Plymouth in its early years and his meditations, especially upon the tribulations, is both to instruct later generations and to uncover God's will through his divine Providence.

An early example of the use of typology is the sustained reference to the terrain of Massachusetts as a wilderness that has to be conquered by the English settlers. One particular description recalls the Israelites' wanderings

² Emory Elliott, "Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 1*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 229.

³ Emory Elliott, "The Jeremiad," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 1*, ed. by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 257.

⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) and Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

in the desert as well as the promises of Canaan. Bradford in *Of Plymouth Plantation* recounts the first landing of the Puritans, their first sighting of the Native Americans and that a scouting party “soon lost both them and themselves, falling into such thickets as were ready to tear their clothes and armor in pieces.”⁵ The untamed wilderness found in rhetorical account of thickets able to attain complete destruction of English metal armor highlights an adversarial environment in which the Native Americans flourished and utilized to their advantage against the religious settlers. Throughout Puritan literature the wilderness serves as a barrier and a danger to God’s people and recalls the suffering of the Israelites in the Old Testament because of the privation it represents in both the Biblical account and the reality of New England. The Native Americans are an elusive group at the beginning of this chronicle, a source of unease and fear because the Puritans cannot make contact with them, and are instead being led into an unforgiving wilderness where they lose themselves and begin to thirst, both for a way out of this predicament and for life sustaining water. Bradford notes the end of this problem and special emphasis can be placed on the fact that “at length they found water and refreshed themselves . . . and [the New England water] was now in great thirst as pleasant unto them as wine or beer had been in foretimes.”⁶ The elevation of the water serves as a hint to the New Canaan that the Puritans were attempting to build for themselves and harkens to the Old Testament note of the promised land being refreshing to the world weary Israelites. The implicit meaning in the refreshment of water also points to God’s grace as refreshment to the religious because water is seen as a dual symbol of both refreshment and rebirth. The Puritan religious would see the presence of life-sustaining water as a symbol of the life-sustaining grace of God. Furthermore, Puritan tribulations in the New England wilderness pointed to a typological linkage to the Israelites experience in the wilderness and thus indicated the righteousness of their course in the New World.

According to Jesper Rosenmeier, in an essay on William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*, “Bradford’s aim is not to portray the past with the fullest possible objectivity but to resurrect a bygone holiness.”⁷ None of the Puritan literature is used for its own sake, but its purpose is to instruct and inform the Puritan mindset, especially of the later generations. Literature’s

⁵ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* (New York: The Modern Library, 1981), 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Jesper Rosenmeier, “‘With My Owne Eyes’: William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*,” in *The American Puritan Imagination: Essays in Revaluation*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 91.

purpose was to promote “right attitudes and right conduct. . . . But [the Puritans] also believed, with many ancient authorities, that ‘examples are more powerful than precepts,’ and thus the esteem given to expository works was shared by history and biography.”⁸ The use of typology is important to the success of this discourse because it brings the Puritan closer to God and finding links within current history and biblical history creates an outline of the upstanding life a pious Puritan should lead. The lives of the saints and godly people are also important to pointing out a correct religious piety. Throughout Puritan literature is the fear that the later generations will lose sight of the basis for the founding of the Massachusetts colonies and the sole reason for the existence of a separate Puritan colony will be diminished by the elevation of the secular world over the spiritual world.

The literary world of Bradford’s ideal Puritan community and separation from the Native Americans did not reflect the social and political reality in which Bradford was forced to unite with these people. The treaty in 1621 with the Wampanoag reflects the dichotomy that existed in Puritan relations with the Native Americans. Bradford saw the treaty in 1621 with the Wampanoag in a light that “their peace and acquaintance was pretty well established with the natives about them.”⁹ As seen with the current historical status of the treaty, the Puritan community did not just settle into a peaceful accord with the Native Americans surrounding them. The peculiar treaty was a one-sided agreement in which the Wampanoag were bound to the Puritans, but the treaty benefited the English more than any other group. The treaty and its subsequent celebration chronicled in the *First Thanksgiving* can be seen as “less a reflection of godly [Puritans] making peace with the Indians than of a hardheaded divide-and-rule strategy.”¹⁰ The overall notion that the Puritans did not have relations with the Native Americans in order to convert them is true, at first, but they did take steps to hamper any efforts on the part of the native population to subvert their efforts in creating a New Jerusalem. The Native Americans were seen as a threat to religious sovereignty in the New England landscape, a sinful element in their new settlement that would, at times, transform the Native American identity into the helpmate of Satan and a violent attack against both the physical and spiritual world of the Puritans.

⁸ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), 185.

⁹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 97.

¹⁰ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98.

The Native Americans, more often than not, fit into the typological discourse that Bradford and later Puritan writers will use as a jeremiad to bring back the zeal and piety that is seen early on in the first community. In the later portions of Bradford's work, he noted the epidemic that devastated the Native American populations surrounding the Puritan colony and brought to the forefront that "by the marvelous goodness and providence of God, not one of the English was so much as sick or in the least measure tainted with this disease."¹¹ In a typological discourse, God punished the Native Americans for their beliefs and actions, while the Puritans are spared from this fate because of their Christian piety. Bradford's book worked in a prophetic tone, extolling the community to be on guard against the temptations of a worldly life, but also revealed an attitude toward the Native Americans that denoted distance in their eternal fate, but also promoted them as a warning for putting emphasis on a secular world and straying from God.

While Bradford does not actively look to convert these individuals seen as heathens within the Puritan mindset, there are others who worked for various reasons to this end. The same problems with piety occurred within John Winthrop's time, as well as other leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. At this point the Puritans' relationship with the Native Americans begins to evolve as a pluralism of beliefs on the role of these native people as opponents or population needing God's grace and conversion. Some of the Puritans actively worked to convert the Native Americans, for differing reasons, while others placed them in a typological discourse in which the unfaithful younger generations cause God's wrath in the form of armed conflict with the native population.

John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity" serves as one of the first typological instances in his long career of comparing New England to New Jerusalem. His high expectations of creating a city on a hill and the strict observance of the covenant that the new colonists are to abide by are preempted with the warning that "dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall inencions seekeing greate things for our selues and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against vs be revenged of such a periured people and make vs knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant."¹² Winthrop does not hesitate to use the jeremiad as a way to keep the religious community from straying from the faithful's path to redemption and salvation, creating a dire

¹¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 303.

¹² John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001), 198.

future if the community fails because of the individual sinful nature. One of the interests of Winthrop's argument in "A Modell of Christian Charity" to the current explication of the Native American role in religious literature is the fact that throughout the vein of these Puritan tracts the Native American population is forced into an unstable relationship with the English religious community and any carnal intentions or breach of compact with God can be blamed on the influence of the ungodly and marginalized native peoples found in close proximity to Puritan settlements. Puritan leaders effectively created a monstrous "Other" within the guise of the Native American people because, even through the religious conversion of these peoples, Puritans saw only a suspicious population vastly different from their own and indifferent to religious piety.

Winthrop, as an example of the newer generation of Massachusetts, kept alive the same contemplation of the mortal life and signs of God's pleasure or displeasure as Bradford emphasized in his works. One of the major differences is the emphasis Winthrop placed on the devil in day-to-day events in the colony or the "constant 'plots' spawned by the Devil to 'disturb' our peace, and to raise up instruments one after another."¹³ One memorable moment that is noted in his *Journal* is mention of a snake that came into a congregation during a sermon and was killed by a parishioner. Winthrop noted the symbolic presence of the snake as portent, writing, and "the serpent is the devil; the synod, the representative of the churches of Christ in New England. The devil had formerly and lately attempted their disturbance and dissolution; but their faith in the seed of the woman overcame him and crushed his head."¹⁴ Symbolism is seen throughout the faithful's life and the Native American soon became a part of the typological and symbolic scrutiny of life in Puritan New England.

The Native Americans, through the threat inherent in the Pequot War, served as agents of Satan that, combined with the heretical stance of Anne Hutchinson, worked to erode the safe foundation of the Puritan community. This war with the Native Americans "posed a serious threat to the colonies that added to the atmosphere of crisis in which the Hutchinsonian faction would emerge and be judged."¹⁵ The convergence of internal and external threats served to galvanize the Puritan church and the use of typology would strengthen the community leaders', especially

¹³ David. D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 91.

¹⁴ John Winthrop, "Journal," in *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writing*, edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001), 143.

¹⁵ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment*, 69.

Winthrop's, call for increased vigilance. The social and political reality in Massachusetts mirrored events in the Old and New Testament, especially the temptation of God's people by heretical notions, but this Puritan society was able to weather the storms of such soul shaking differences of opinion.

The changing attitudes toward the Native Americans can be seen within the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter which "charged the colony's officials to 'wynn and incite the Natives . . . [to] the onlie true God and Saviour of Mankinde.'"¹⁶ The Separatists under William Bradford may have taken a lackadaisical approach to salvation of the Native Americans' souls, but the Puritans in the Great Migration felt it was their duty to convert those who were unknowing of God's saving grace. Several reasons existed for this need to convert, from mundane spiritual superiority to fantastic prophetic revelation, including the construction of Native American populations in the New World as the lost tribe of Israel.

The evolution of both the spiritual and secular attitudes of the Puritans towards the Native Americans occurred in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and elsewhere. Once the colony was well established and secure on the foundations of its religiosity, the "Massachusetts officers insisted that Indians acknowledge their superiority and subject themselves to colony authority."¹⁷ The dichotomy of superiority and inferiority differed greatly from the feelings of alliance and distanced "friendship." While Winthrop was governor of the colony he received gifts and gave gifts to the Native Americans, but this type of fellowship should not be confused.¹⁸ Winthrop did not equate the sachems of the tribes as on the same level as the English. The leaders were rather a means to an end in which peace could be assured.

The typological sermon evolved and the jeremiad also became indicative in terms of exhorting the second generation Puritans into obedience to the colony's laws and by extension God's law. The younger generations did not give their consent to the original covenant that this city on a hill was founded, but were seen as the problems inherent in society. The sermons serve as evidence "that their parents had been heroic people who sacrificed all to found a godly commonwealth; the children of the first generation, on the other hand, were corrupt, faithless, a grief to their forebears. Even the blame for King Philip's War was laid at their feet."¹⁹ The bad behavior of the Native Americans was not only a source of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁷ Jenny Hale Pulsipher, *Subjects Unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

typological evil that pointed to their degeneracy as a people but also as evidence of the degeneracy of the second generation Puritans, spurring the need for the typological construction of sermon utilizing the rhetorical flourishes of the jeremiad.

Figures in colonial literature and life, such as Roger Williams and others, did effectively work to convert the Native Americans and their reaction to the Puritan faith worked to substantiate the many claims made by Puritan writers. King Philip's War served as typological evidence of the Puritan's actions and this evidence had both a positive and negative connotation. Just as the conversion of the Native Americans evolved from an apathetic view of the spiritual fate of the heathen into a concerted effort to save a soul, the evils of the war pointed to both the Native American as an evil figure of temptation and the voice that confirmed the rightness of the Puritan faith. Many of the converted Native Americans in the towns and surrounding areas felt that the outbreak of war was evidence that the English God had left them and this attitude informed a regeneration of piety in the English mindset. Increase Mather noted that the success of English forces in 1676 caused "renewals in church covenants, particularly in Plymouth Colony, where the colony leaders encouraged it [and] this harmony of divine and civil authority was pleasing to God, and the course of the war seemed to confirm it."²⁰ The Native Americans, during King Philip's War, became an active voice in the typological debate on God's pleasure in the actions of the Puritans and these exclamations by the converted population, as well as victory, served as evidence of God's rewards to his faithful followers. Typology within the New England landscape does not only work in a negative way, by pointing out sinful behavior and calling for religious change and piety, but also works to highlight the wonders of God's grace and the joy to be found in the compact with God in the New World.

The Native Americans in the course of the colonization of New England, specifically Massachusetts, by the Puritans do not fall into a strict category in terms of their relationship with the English. This group's role in a typological discourse on the piety of the Puritans as well as God's pleasure or displeasure with the elect informs the prevailing attitudes of the time period. The Native Americans move from a distanced group that lead the Puritans astray in the early days of Bradford's life in New England to a group more readily ensconced in Puritan daily life that served as both a temptation and warning to the English faithful. There is no one true categorization of the Native Americans in terms of the typological evidence used in Puritan literature, but their role serves as a way to examine the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

Puritans' mindset when dealing with the natural world and the hardships that are encountered with creating the New Jerusalem. As the time period progressed, the Native American can be seen as an enlightened sinner or hopeless heathen and both connotations serve well in the discourse of typology and jeremiad to keep the Puritan fold pious and zealous in their religion.