

Armaments for the Daughters of Zion: The Puritan Woman and Her Spiritual Authority over the Physical World

by Aaron James Whiting

The Puritan woman walked between two worlds. In the physical world of seventeenth-century New England, she walked humbly within the walls of her father's home, submitted to his will, learned to read and write, and acquired the skills necessary to one day manage a household of her own. After marriage, she walked humbly within the walls of her husband's home, submitted to his will, bore his children and managed his house, and taught her daughters the skills necessary to one day manage a household of their own. But this world was not the only world in which she lived. When she fell to her knees in prayer and raised her thoughts to Heaven, she walked into a world of the spirit and, as a good Puritan, she knew that all saved souls submitted equally before the glory of God. In the world of the spirit she was not a woman, confined by duty to her husband and obligation to her children, rather she was a soul unworthy of salvation but blessed by His grace to be a member of His family. She was not a daughter, nor a wife, but a genderless child of God. Strict gender roles were a necessary component of the Puritan need to impose Ramist logic upon a disordered fallen physical world, but, in the perfect spiritual world of Heaven, such constructs were unneeded. Before God, all the elect were equally undeserving, all the elect were equally saved, and all the elect equally worshipped at His altar. In universal submission to God, gender roles – and social constructs of all forms – would be wiped away. As a result, the Puritan woman walked between two worlds: a physical world that elevated one gender above the other, and a spiritual world that equalized both genders.

For the most part, the Puritan woman could exist in either one or the other of these worlds, but they almost never crossed paths. Even within the Puritan church, the physical reflection of the spiritual confine, the worlds were separated; men and women sat apart and women were often prevented from even speaking due to the common interpretation of the Apostle Paul's command that women keep silent in church. But there were a few unique circumstances in which these two paths did cross. One of the most prominent examples is found in the captivity narrative of Hannah Dustan, authored by Cotton Mather. Like many Puritan leaders, Mather was a proponent of female education, but his Dustan tract reveals a more radical belief in arming the Puritan woman for the possibility of physical and spiritual warfare against the worldly agents of Satan. Within the pages of Dustan's captivity narrative, Cotton Mather

uncovered the rare crossroads where the Puritan woman practiced spiritual authority over the physical world.

The captivity narrative is arguably America's oldest literary genre. Accounts of dramatic encounters with Native Americans, including captivities and escapes, were common in the early colonial literature of most European nations. For the most part, these early captivity narratives were little more than "dramatic episodes in works of larger scope," providing readers in Europe titillating accounts of Indian "savagery."¹ The Puritans, on the other hand, adopted the literary form for expressly religious purposes. Rather than recount thrilling moments of escapist adventure, Puritans chose to author captivity narratives that served as supplemental religious tracts that related harrowing events as the will of a just God.²

In transforming the captivity narrative into spiritually redemptive literature, the Puritans combined three literary strands: the spiritual autobiography, the sermon, and the jeremiad. A Puritan woman living at the turn of the eighteenth century would have been intimately familiar with these three literary forms. Spiritual autobiographies, such as John Winthrop's "Christian Experience," were a staple of Puritan literature.³ The sermon, of course, was "that quintessential Puritan expression."⁴ A typical Puritan woman listened to approximately seven thousand sermons over the course of her life.⁵ Sermons were such an integral part of Puritan faith that they were often published and read outside of church for further study. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that captivity narratives "borrowed liberally from sermon themes and languages," including moral lessons and frequent inclusion of biblical citations.⁶ The final literary strand, the jeremiad, were sermons that "catalogued the sins of an erring people, recited the afflictions visited upon them by a wrathful God and urged them to reform before they were punished."⁷ Jeremiads rose in popularity after the mid-seventeenth century when pastors began to accuse their flocks of "backsliding from the high ideals and noble achievements" of the previous generation.⁸

The belief in the spiritual backsliding of the second and third generations of Puritans in New England was known as declension and had a profound impact on

¹ Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity: Puritan Captivity Narratives as Literature and History," in *Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and Redemption, 1676-1724*, edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 2.

² Margaret H. Davis, "Mary White Rowlandson's Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife," *Early American Literature* 27, no. 1 (1992), 50.

³ Vaughan & Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity," 4.

⁴ Vaughan & Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity," 6.

⁵ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ Vaughan & Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity," 6-7.

⁷ Karen Halttunen, "Cotton Mather and the Meaning of Suffering in the 'Magnalia Christi Americana,'" *Journal of American Studies* 12, no 3 (1978), 312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553427>.

⁸ Vaughan & Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity," 7.

shaping Puritan captivity narratives. In essence, many prominent Puritans arrived at the opinion that, in the wake of such innovations as the half-way covenant, which allowed baptized but unconverted children membership in churches, New England's spiritual life was declining and Puritans were becoming far too comfortable with the ways of the world at the expense of their duties to God.⁹ Nearly coinciding with this period of declining piety, New England suffered a series of devastating Indian Wars that destroyed thousands of homes and claimed hundreds of lives. Seen through the prism of Old Testament accounts of God's punishment of faithless Israel, the bloodshed on the frontier was interpreted as God's justified wrath upon faithless New England. As the Reforming Synod of Puritan ministers concluded, "God hath a controversy with his New England people" and He chose the Indians as His "principal rod of chastisement." Unsurprisingly, when Puritan New Englanders returned from the frontier to share stories of their sufferings and torments, they often "looked inward for signs of their own shortcomings" and ultimately reframed the terrors of their captivities as God's just and lawful punishment for New England's collective sins.¹⁰ Thus was born the Puritan theological format of the Indian captivity narrative: a harrowing and often bloody capture, followed by an extended period of intense physical suffering and humiliation, then a recognition, acceptance, and cataloging of the sins that brought about God's just wrath, and concluding with the spiritual and physical redemption of the captive and a closing addendum calling for a return to traditional Puritan piety.

While Puritan piety was based heavily on biblical teaching, Puritans also incorporated non-biblical philosophy into their society. Puritans had an "intense need for psychological and social order" and a tool they often used to mediate between the spiritual realm of God and the fallen physical world in which they lived were the teachings of sixteenth century French philosopher Petrus Ramus. Ramist logic states that all relationships are dual and entirely dependent upon each other.¹¹ The Puritan theological application of Ramist logic led to the belief that "the God of order who made the creatures subordinate to man had arranged human society into a network of dual relationships in which one party was usually subordinate to the other: ruler and subject, husband and wife, parent and child, master and servant."¹² As such, the husband ruled his wife, parents ruled their children, and masters ruled their servants.¹³ Thereby, Puritans brought order upon the chaos of the fallen world. Additionally, this belief in order and relationships was not only at the very heart of their covenant-based church, but also created the surprisingly fluid gender roles in which women existed

⁹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 158-165.

¹⁰ Vaughan & Clark, "Cups of Common Calamity," 9-10.

¹¹ Davis, "Mary White Rowlandson's Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife," 52.

¹² Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 25.

¹³ Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 19.

within Puritan society: soul to God, wife to husband, mother to child, mistress to servant.¹⁴ The first two of those roles – soul and wife – were typically submissive, yet the last two – mother and mistress – placed the Puritan women in a position of socially and biblically acceptable authority. The Puritan woman, therefore, was not perpetually submissive but quite used to practicing authority over her inferiors.

It is important to reiterate that Puritan society did not believe in earthly equality between the sexes but they also did not believe that souls had physical genders. On a spiritual level, Puritan saints were genderless. In *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, Cotton Mather listed the virtues of a Christian woman: a natural belief in God, a reverence for God, a fear of offending God, laboring for God, and worshipping God.¹⁵ In her landmark review of New England ministerial literature, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich outlines a very similar list of Puritan female virtues: seeking God, praying and fasting, love of church, reading, conversing, writing, managing well, and submitting to the will of God.¹⁶ But what is fascinating is that Mather and Ulrich's lists are not lists of female virtues at all, for these same virtues are listed in nearly all male ministerial literature as well. In Puritan theology, there are no "inherently female spiritual qualities" because Puritan spiritual reality is "unrelated" to gender.¹⁷ As Ulrich argues, "In a very real sense there is no such thing as *female* piety in early New England" because, spiritually-speaking, male and female Puritans were equal before God.¹⁸ As a result, the Puritan woman walked along two paths: the strictly gendered path of the well-ordered world of Puritan New England, where she constantly shifted between submissive and assertive modes based upon the context of Ramist relations; and the path outside of ordered society, such as in moments of prayer upon a spiritual plane, where she was, at her core, an autonomous, genderless soul.

But what of those rare moments when those two paths crossed? Was there a place on this side of the grave where the strictly gendered world of Puritan civilization fell away and the Puritan woman found herself operating outside of Christian society and Ramist relations? The answer, in the opinion of Puritans such as Cotton Mather, was yes. Along the frontier, the Puritan woman found herself pulled between two worlds. It was common for the Puritan living on the sparsely populated frontier to lose some of the fire of their faith. The strenuous and time-consuming requirements of frontier life, the lack of opportunities for Christian fellowship with neighbors, and the often prohibitive distances from the nearest church left many Puritans concerned that their private prayers alone were not enough to maintain their covenant relationship

¹⁴ Davis, "Mary White Rowlandson's Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife," 52.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (Cambridge: Samuel Phillips, 1692), 21-29. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00500.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

¹⁶ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1688-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976), 22-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712475>.

¹⁷ Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found," 32.

¹⁸ Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found," 28.

with God and they would be cut-off from Christian society.¹⁹ Furthermore, as the Indian Wars of the last quarter of the seventeenth-century arrived, Puritans believed the very land they occupied was overrun by the enemies of Christ: French “papists” and Indian “savages.”

Puritans considered the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism to be “the most important issue in the western world.”²⁰ While there was obviously some level of competing nationalism between Catholic France and Protestant England which influenced anti-Catholic beliefs among Englishmen, Puritan anti-Catholicism went far deeper than a mere distaste for a “foreign” religion. In fact, Puritans considered Catholicism to be both their “antithesis and perpetual nemesis”²¹ and, in their writings, often spoke of Catholics in diabolical terms: “[They] have not the Spirit of Christ working in them...but the lying spirit of Antichrist, the devil.”²² In the eyes of Puritans, Catholic rituals reeked of “diabolical presumption” and satanically perverted the true faith of Christ.²³ If the goal of Puritan Christianity was to bring order to the fallen world, Catholicism, with its man-made rituals and ignorance of the true covenant faith, spread chaos and disorder. As one early seventeenth-century Puritan stated, “Antichrist is such a one as will be lawlesse, subject and lyable to no law, but will over-top and over-rule all lawes at his pleasure.”²⁴ For the New England Puritan, the Catholic was a reminder of Fallen Man, of Adam’s elevation of his own will over the will of God, and, just as Adam’s sin spread corruption upon all of humanity, Catholicism threatened to spread an “antichrist” corruption among the true believers of the covenant faith. The covenant-faithful most in danger of contracting the vile plague of Papism were the backsliding members who lived alone along the frontier, stalked by the antichrist’s foot-soldiers, the Indians.

Cotton Mather was a typical example of the complex Puritan relationship with Native Americans. Mather’s bibliography runs red with lurid tales of Indian atrocities upon Puritan saints. In his account of the Indian Wars, Mather meticulously describes the torture of a New Englander:

They fell to Torturing their Captive John Diamond, after a manner very Diabolical. They stripped him, they Scalped him alive, and after a Castration, they Finished that Article of Punishment of Traitors upon him; they Slit him with Knives, between his Fingers and his Toes; They made cruel Gashes in the most Fleшы parts

¹⁹ Vaughan & Clark, “Cups of Common Calamity,” 5-6.

²⁰ Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001), 8.

²¹ Timothy L. Wood, “‘A Church Still by Her Covenant.’ George Philips and the Puritan View of Roman Catholicism,” *New England Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (Mar. 1999), 30.

²² Timothy L. Wood, *Agents of Wrath, Sowers of Discord: Authority and Dissent in Puritan Massachusetts, 1630-1655* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 40

²³ Wood, “‘A Church Still by Her Covenant,’” 31.

²⁴ Michael P. Winship, “Freeborn (Puritan) Englishmen and Slavish Subjection: Popish Tyranny and Puritan Constitutionalism, c.1570-1606,” *English Historical Review* 124, no. 510 (October 2009), 1058.

of his Body, and stuck the Gashes with Firebrands, which were afterwards found Sticking in the wounds.²⁵

Perhaps believing that a single graphic account of torture was not sufficient to establish the complete villainy of Indians, Mather's *Decennium Luctuosum* contains dozens of additional examples of Indian "savagery," particularly targeted at the most innocent of the Puritan faith: the infants and children of Puritan captives:

[The Indian] Buried the Blade of his Hatchet, in the Brains of the Child, and then chopt the Breathless Body to pieces before the rest of the company, and threw it into the River.²⁶

[The Indian] violently Snatcht the Babe out of its Mother's Arms, and before her Face knockt out its Brains, and stript it of the Few Rags it had hitherto Enjoy'd, and order'd her the Task, to go wash the Bloody Cloaths. Returning from this Melancholy Task, She found the Infant hanging by the Neck in a Forked Bough of a Tree.²⁷

Sitting down to Rest, she was not able to Rise, until her Diabolical Master help'd her up; which when he did, he took her Child from her, and carried it unto a River, where stripping it of the few Rags it had, he took it by the Heels, and against a Tree dash'd out its Brains, and then flang it into the river.²⁸

Cotton Mather considered himself a friend to the Indians. Mather authored several tracts which promoted the conversion of Indians and served as the Commissioner of Indian affairs for the New England Company for several years.²⁹ In his massive ecclesiastical history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather commended the work of John Eliot and his creation of an "Indian Bible."³⁰ But Mather's desire to promote Indian conversion was ultimately self-serving because Puritan doctrine identified the conversion of Indians as a requirement of millennial prophecy.³¹ Additionally, Mather's multiple commentaries in both the *Magnalia*³² and *Decennium Luctuosum*³³ that Puritan Indian conversion was far superior to Catholic Indian

²⁵ Cotton Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," in *Narratives of the Indian Wars 1675-1699*, edited by Charles H. Lincoln, 169-301. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), PDF ebook, 238-239. <https://archive.org/details/narrativesofindi00linc>.

²⁶ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 209-210.

²⁷ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 210.

²⁸ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 212.

²⁹ Vaughan & Clark, 135.

³⁰ Constance Post, "Old World Order in the New: John Eliot and 'Praying Indians' in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*." *The New England Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (1993), 416-417. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/366004>.

³¹ Post, "Old World Order in the New," 420.

³² Post, "Old World Order in the New," 421.

³³ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 258.

conversion, reveals that, in many ways, Native Americans were little more than spiritual cannon fodder in the ongoing war between Mather's authentic Puritan faith and the false idolatry of "Romish Papism." To Mather, an Indian removed from the order of Christian civilization and in the clutches of the antichristian papists was little more than a demonic creature, "devils" who lived in "the Dark places of New-England" and sacrificed any and all saints who fell into their hands.³⁴

These "Dark places of New-England" was where Hannah Dustin called home; along the frontier, far beyond the security of her spiritual covenant and outside of ordered society. When the "red-skinned devils" were unleashed by their "papist" masters, and atrocities recalling the bloodiest passages of the Old Testament were unleashed upon "faithless" New England, the two paths of Puritan life crossed. On the frontier of New England, and in the pages of Cotton Mather's captivity narrative, Hannah Dustan took her place upon a spiritual and physical battlefield.

In 1697, a tribe of Indians attacked the frontier town of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Twenty-seven inhabitants were killed and nearly two dozen were taken away as hostages to the French. Hannah Dustan gave birth to her daughter, Martha, less than a week before the attack and was still "laid-in" when the raid occurred. Her husband, Thomas, managed to flee with their eight other children but Hannah and her nurse, Mary Neff, were captured. The Indians immediately murdered Hannah's infant and marched Hannah and Mary toward Canada. It was at this point that Hannah's story took its most memorable and controversial turn: Hannah, wielding a tomahawk, murdered her captors and their families, including six children. After scalping the bodies, Hannah, Martha, and another English captive escaped by canoe and returned safely home.³⁵ The Dustan story has long been fodder for social historians, as Dustan – due to the bloody method of her escape – was hailed as a proto-American hero and condemned as a heartless villain. But what is of interest in the Dustan story for our purposes is her example of spiritual authority over the physical world and how she was socially and religiously able to wield that bloody hatchet.

Most stories of Hannah Dustan focus on the murder of her child as the primary motive for her vengeance and point to a line in Mather's narrative as proof, "She thought she was not forbidden by any law to take away the life of the murderers by whom her child had been butchered."³⁶ This is an emotionally powerful idea; eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. But it fails to account for multiple other examples of Puritan women who witnessed the murders of their children, yet humbly submitted to the will

³⁴ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 208.

³⁵ Cotton Mather, "A Narrative of Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance from Captivity," in *Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and Redemption 1676-1724*, edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 159-164.

³⁶ Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 164.

of God.³⁷ Perhaps a better understanding of Hannah's justification is found by reading Mather's entire sentence:

But on April 30, while they were yet it may be about an hundred and fifty miles from the Indian town, a little before the break of day when the whole crew was in dead sleep (Reader, see if it prove not so!) one of these women took up a resolution to imitate the action of Jael upon Sisera [Judges 4], and, being where she had not her own life secured by any law unto her, she thought she was not forbidden by any law to take away the life of the murderers by whom her child had been butchered.³⁸

There is a great deal more in this passage than a maternal cry for vengeance. Rather, in a typically Matherian sentence (verbose, multiple clauses, and intrusive and unnecessary commentary), Mather endorsed Dustan's actions by reminding the reader of two justifying factors: Dustan's spiritual authority rooted in biblical precedent and Dustan's location outside of ordered Puritan society.

The story of Jael and Sisera found in the Old Testament Book of Judges recalled the Puritan belief in Indian captivity as punishment for spiritual declension: "And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, when Ehud was dead. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera."³⁹ Dustan (or at least Mather's literary interpretation of Dustan) drew a parallel with her own situation. She was literally to be sold into the hands of French papists and was held by what she viewed as a "captain" of their army, the Indian tribes the French armed and unleashed upon New England. And when Dustan found herself awake while her captors slept, she undoubtedly considered Sisera's death. After the defeat of his army, Sisera sought refuge at the home of a Kenite, but the Kenite's wife, Jael, drove a tent peg into the sleeping Sisera's skull.⁴⁰ Not only were Jael's actions commended in the "Song of Deborah,"⁴¹ but they substantiated the Puritan belief in genderless spiritual authority. After all, God willed a woman to slay the enemy of His people. In fact, God willed a woman, Deborah, to act as judge over all of Israel at that same time. As Hannah Dustan stood over the sleeping bodies of her Indian captors and balanced a hatchet in her hand, she fully believed that God had given her the spiritual authority to judge His enemies.

But Mather was clear that spiritual authority alone did not give Hannah Dustan justification to murder her captives. After all, within the strictly ordered society of Puritan New England, women submitted to men who ruled over them. In childhood, the Puritan woman submitted to her father, in marriage the Puritan woman submitted

³⁷ Mather, "Decennium Luctuosum," 209-212.

³⁸ Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 164.

³⁹ Judges 4:1-2. King James Version.

⁴⁰ Judges 4: 17-21. King James Version.

⁴¹ Judges 5:24-26. King James Version.

to her husband, and when held prisoner the Puritan woman submitted to her captor. If Hannah Dustan killed her captor, she would violate the God-ordained structure of Christian society. But what if she was not in Christian society?

In his narrative of Dustan's captivity, Mather provided multiple examples that Hannah had been removed from the order of Christian society. She was described as "full of astonishment" and "fearful expectation" after being left "in the hands of those whose tender mercies are cruelties."⁴² After murdering their captives, the "savage" Indians denied Puritan victims a Christian burial, "leav[ing] their carcasses on the ground for the birds and beasts to feed upon."⁴³ Furthermore, Hannah's Indian captors were Catholic "idolaters," who not only attempted to prevent her from praying, but also forced her to watch them practice their despised faith multiple times each day. Lastly, the Indians told Hannah that when they arrived at their destination she would be "stripped and scourged and run the gauntlet through the whole army of Indians."⁴⁴ Hannah Dustan had clearly moved beyond the reach of Puritan society and, therefore, she was also outside the control of Christian order.

That night, standing over her sleeping captors, holding a hatchet and confident in her spiritual authority over Papist savages, Hannah Dustan knew that she had arrived at a place "where she had not her own life secured by any law unto her." Freed from the legalistic restraints of Puritan society, but acting fully within the accepted genderless spiritual authority of her Puritan faith, Hannah knew that "she was not forbidden by any law to take away the life of the murderers by whom her child had been butchered."⁴⁵ Hannah Dustan did not break the Puritan edict of female submission to male authority. Rather, as a prisoner of idolatrous Indians, carried beyond the reach of Puritan New England, and confronted with the prospect of life under the spiritual dominion of the Roman anti-Christ, Hannah Dustan found herself in a world that merged the physical and the spiritual. In that place where those two paths crossed, the responsibilities of her spiritual identity superseded the ordered submissiveness of her physical gender. And she swung the hatchet.

Why did Cotton Mather's decide to immortalize Hannah Dustan's bloody escape from captivity? The answer is certainly not a desire to promote feminism. There was no such thing as a Puritan feminist. In fact, the very idea would have been either alien or entirely offensive to the Mather and his fellow Puritans. Men and women were born with different genders which bore different responsibilities and those physical and social differences reflected the order of God's creation. Any attempt to level or equalize gender relations within a Christian society would almost certainly have been perceived as an attempt to pervert the will of God. Yet the Puritans were not the cold, unfeeling,

⁴² Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 162-163.

⁴³ Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 163.

⁴⁴ Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 163-164.

⁴⁵ Mather, "Hannah Dustan's Notable Deliverance," 164.

and immovable caricatures they have become in the eyes of popular culture. In matters of gender-relations, Puritan women enjoyed a surprising amount of agency, due to the application of Ramist logic upon biblical precepts. While the Puritan woman was certainly dominated by her father and by her husband, she carried the voice of authority in interactions with her children and, more importantly, her servants. As mistress of the house, it was not only accepted but expected for the Puritan woman to command both male and female servants. There was no accepted gender-based precept that allowed male servants to refuse the commands of a Puritan woman who managed the house. The Puritan woman may not have been liberated, but she was not enslaved.

Mather's Dustan narrative, rooted in Puritan faith and the genderless nature of the human soul, allowed the Puritan woman to achieve spiritual equality. The Puritan faith espoused no distinct or gender-based spiritual virtues. The Puritans did not rank or endorse one gender's spiritual value over the other, nor did the Puritans place gender-based barriers or restrictions upon access to God's saving grace. All souls submitted equally before the throne of God. Because of this ungendered interpretation of the soul, Puritan women like Hannah Dustan enjoyed spiritual autonomy. But the defining moment of Mather's narrative was when Dustan's spiritual autonomy changed into spiritual authority.

The Dustan captivity narrative, rooted as it was in the fluidity of Ramist-based gender relations and an acceptance of spiritual autonomy, expressed Mather's belief in the opportunities for Puritan women to practice spiritual authority over the world. But those opportunities were only possible under certain circumstances. In Mather's eyes, Hannah Dustan would never have swung a hatchet had she been standing over the sleeping body of a constable while locked in a Boston jail. Her Puritan beliefs would have forced her to humbly submit to her jailor and patiently wait for her husband to arrange her release. Hannah Dustan's moment of spiritual authority over the physical world was only possible because of the unique circumstances surrounding her captivity: her complete removal from the physical protection – and limitations – of Christian society; her belief in the Catholic threat to her salvation; the biblical example of Jael; and her spiritual superiority over her "idolatrous" Indian victims.

Hannah Dustan was not a feminist. But she was also not a victim. She was not an enslaved woman who lived her entire life forced upon her knees by the ruling patriarchy. Hannah Dustan was a Christian and a covenant daughter of Christ. Hannah Dustan was also a wife to her husband, a mother to her children, and a mistress to her servants. And on one night in 1697 Hannah Dustan was a Puritan warrior, imposing her spiritual authority upon nearly a dozen Native Americans with a single stolen hatchet. And after that night, Hannah Dustan was once again a Christian and a covenant daughter of Christ, and a wife and a mother. And she could be all of those things because she was a Puritan woman.