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Book Review: Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination

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Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination

Kenyon Gradert

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020

246 pp.

Kenyon Gradert's *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination* offers a fresh look at "Puritan origins" narratives that took hold during the antebellum period by examining how and why abolitionist writers invoked the Puritan past. The *Mayflower*'s mythic landing at Plymouth Rock launched enduring narratives of American exceptionalism, promoted in generations of scholarship and renewed in cultural memory in solemn intonations of "Pilgrim's pride" and millions of construction paper hand-turkeys. Boosters and critics of this narrative agree that it enshrines "traditional" values. But, as Gradert asserts, origin stories can "bolster a revolutionary vanguard as much as a reactionary rearguard" (6). The 1619 Project bears out that claim, with its call to "reframe American history" around the powerful image of a ship arriving at Jamestown "bearing a cargo of 20-30 enslaved Africans" as "the country's very origin"; so does the backlash against it, including the effort launched by the National Association of Scholars to "refute" its account of American origins and "provide broader pictures of American history," called—what else?—The 1620 Project. In turn, as the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe's "'Our' Story: 400 Years of Wampanoag History" exhibit exemplifies, the memory of Plymouth Rock need not enforce patriotic consensus. In Gradert's vivid account, abolitionists hailed "the Puritan

spirit” as a discourse of spiritual liberty that not only legitimated dissent but also mandated revolt against tyranny and willingness (even zeal) to kill and die for a righteous cause. *Puritan Spirits* argues that this revolutionary abolitionist discourse of Puritanism has “bolstered a progressive politics of memory” (10), a counterpoint to “our usual memories of Puritanism as a conservative force for capitalism, prudery, exceptionalism, and empire” (6).

In the introduction, Gradert clarifies that *Puritan Spirits* is “not a study of ‘the Puritan origins of abolition’ but of the resonance of the Puritan past within the abolitionist imagination” (10). He curates a rich archive of antebellum writing about Puritans, but writings *by* Puritans and eighteenth-century post-Puritans mostly provide epigraph material; this is not a long history of Puritan or New England abolitionist rhetoric. Each of the six main chapters is a case study that clusters multiple figures together around a particular Puritan trope or aesthetic of “the abolitionist imagination” or a particular institutional site (the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society; the poetry column of the *Liberator*). Certain themes and images cross chapters, including the use of Cromwell and Milton as heroic types; the tensions between “imagined” or spiritual warfare and actual violence; the different invocations of Puritans by gradualists and immediatists, pacifists and militants (and how the same figures tacked between these positions); the vitality of abolitionist print culture; the reckoning with white writers’ “Saxonism, New England chauvinism, and (by today’s standards) retrograde conceptions of race, gender, and religion” (42). The book coheres less as an argument than as thick description of an “episode in a long battle over our *memory* of the Puritans” (5). Gradert’s archive provides early Americanists with material that can enhance our approaches to the antebellum period and provide context for the stories we tell about Puritans and their influence in our scholarship and our classrooms.

Chapter 1 examines how Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Wendell Phillips invoked the Puritan past as a model of “spiritual heroism,” casting radical abolition as redeemer in a providential narrative of American democracy in which “progress was inevitable yet revolutionary” (32). Gradert opens with the figure of John Brown, noting how frequently abolitionists used the word “Puritan” to praise him (17). As anti-slavery advocacy radicalized into “millennial zeal for America’s bloodiest war,” both Brown and Toussaint Louverture were hailed as “Cromwells”; Phillips deemed Louverture “a black Cromwell” (35). Claiming a revolutionary nonconformist heritage from their ancestors legitimated “a spiritual revolution that would salvage the heroic soul of democracy” (23). The chapter concludes with an intriguing reading of Emerson’s “Voluntaries” as celebrating the leadership of the Black soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th, not just Colonel Shaw.

Chapter 2 discusses how Maria Weston Chapman, Julia Ward Howe, and Lydia Maria Child fulfilled the “types” of Deborah and Jael as “spiritual warriors” proposed by David Ruggles, licensing women’s public role as militant abolitionists (44). Chapman was an active leader within the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and from 1839-1858 the editor of *The Liberty Bell*, a gift book that provided a platform for a host of “ordinary women, international voices, Garrisonians from poorer backgrounds...and fringe radicals” (54)—but which overlooked, as Gradert notes, “the most important actors in the antislavery cause: black people themselves” (56). The brief discussion of Howe presents “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” as “the collective voice” of “abolitionist women who reclaimed the Puritans’ legacy in the antislavery cause” as they “participated in male heroics and sharpened the war with the arc of sacred history” (59). The chapter’s concluding sections on Child make a very compelling case for renewed attention to her critically neglected novella, *The Kansas Emigrants*, which Gradert

describes as “half feminist Western and half Puritan errand into the wilderness” (64), whose heroine is “the literal female warrior that [Child] desired herself to be, participating vicariously” in Bleeding Kansas (65).

William Lloyd Garrison was the abolitionists’ “Gutenberg, Luther, and Milton in one,” and Chapter Three discusses how he and other contributors to the *Liberator* both invoked the Puritans as heroic ancestry and “reviv[ed] their sacred use of print” (75). Gradert observes that Garrison cannily promoted a “revolutionary Protestant heritage of free speech and press” that “sanctioned an aggressive style that thrilled allies, angered enemies, and exasperated moderates” (83-4). This notion of the dissenting press as a “protagonist” in a sacred history of liberty allowed Garrisonians to claim the spirit of Puritanism, granting them “a level of purpose that rivaled that of traditional Christian institutions and experiences” (94). Chapters Four and Five consider the effect of these aspects of Garrisonian Puritanism on other figures’ versions of that past. Chapter Four attends carefully to the works and careers of James Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier and their recognition of abolition as a “mission that might harmonize their romantic poetic ambitions with the ‘truer’ heritage of Puritan conscience and action” (99). Both men were regulars in the *Liberator*’s weekly poetry column, where Milton exemplified “antislavery verse’s propensity for prophecy, apocalypse, and holy war” (101). I wish Gradert had extended his discussion of Charlotte Forten, who appears briefly here as a “zealous disciple” of Whittier and example of how “even poets from nonwhite and non-New England backgrounds could draw inspiration from an imaginative landscape where the Puritan past and abolitionist present joined in holy war” (97-8).

In Chapter 5, Gradert considers how Garrisonianism shaped the Puritan pasts imagined by the Reverend Lyman Beecher and his children, Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher

Stowe. The elder Beecher was, in the 1820s and 30s, the “nation’s most promising ministerial heir to the Puritan errand in a time of growing disestablishment and democracy” (124), even for a time editing a monthly paper, *The Spirit of the Puritans*. But the “growing storm” over slavery left him navigating between “the Scylla of Garrisonian anticlericism and the Charybdis of slavery” (124), manifest as a battle over who could rightly claim “the spirit of the Puritans”—gradualist clerics like Beecher or Garrisonians and antislavery congregations who claimed that spirit for radical abolitionism and “in opposition to the nation’s ‘dead’ churches” (124). The chapter details how Stowe and her brother forged a compromise aesthetic, “*la belle puritaine*,” as “a moderate and church-based antislavery alternative” meant to “create common ground on which the nation could return to its Puritan roots” (125). Henry “zigzag[ed] between conservative and radical impulses” (132), and in so doing navigated “an old Puritan tension: balancing the dissenting individual conscience with the stability of the institutions that protected its rights” (132). Stowe was, according to Gradert, freer than her brother to “imagin[e] what a lovely and useful Puritan heritage might look like in antebellum America” (133-134). He focuses on how her later novels, *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859) and *Oldtown Folks* (1869), dramatize “the conundrum that undid her father: how to cleanse the stain of slavery from America’s social fabric without tearing it apart” (149). Gradert’s compelling discussion of the latter novel, including Stowe’s depiction of Cotton Mather as a “delightful old New England grandmother” (146), is a highlight of the book.

Chapter 6 reminds us that the slave ship and the *Mayflower* have signified “entangled origin stories” of slavery and liberty since the antebellum period (171). The “two ships” was a recurring trope in antebellum writings by Black and white abolitionists, and Gradert focuses on how Black abolitionists, including James McCune Smith, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin

Delany, and William Wells Brown as well as anonymous writers published in *Frederick Douglass' Papers*, the *North Star*, and other periodicals, “reimagined” Puritan origins narratives, “tracing the spiritual legacies of America’s Pilgrim roots backwards to Africa and forward to ‘Christian warriors’ like Toussaint Louverture, Nat Turner, and ultimately the black soldiers of the Union Army” (155). These “black writers radicalized abolitionists’ revolutionary Puritan genealogy by tracing it backward to black roots and forward to fugitive slaves and revolutionary black soldiers” (155). This chapter is the book’s strongest, forcefully realizing the stakes of the project’s “recover[y] of connected critics who used the Puritans to confront America with a choice between two futures” (10). Those dual futures, and confrontations with pasts both imagined and actual, constitute America’s present. A brief conclusion somewhat blunts the momentum of Chapter 6, discussing how Melville’s ambivalent *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* resonates with the scholarly debate between moral and tragic interpretations of the Civil War and then turning to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Gradert’s voice is earnest and engaging, and his analysis is deft throughout, but the framing of the project isn’t entirely convincing. Without asking *Puritan Spirits* to be a different kind of book, I would suggest that more engagement with “historiographical debates about who the Puritans actually were” (5) would help clarify and nuance the project’s premises and stakes, since those debates have challenged monolithic, exceptionalist and teleological approaches to Puritan origins, as has recent work tracing Puritan influence into the antebellum period. I would also have appreciated knowing how Gradert locates his project and method in relation to scholarship on the historical imagination and the politics of cultural memory. The political implications of these writers’ memory of Puritans would be clarified by considering what they forgot. For example, Gradert amply documents the abolitionists’ embrace of English

Puritanism—with Cromwell as militant revolutionary warrior and Milton its bard serving as models for a diverse range of abolitionist figures. But he doesn't consider what this gesture means in relation not just to a "conservative" version of Puritan origins but to the history of Puritan violence against and enslavement of Natives, powerfully remembered by contemporaries like Catharine M. Sedgwick in *Hope Leslie* and by William Apess, whose *Eulogy on King Philip* marshalled an archive of Puritan writing for a radical critique of New England's celebration of filio Pietism as patriotism.

The book's most significant contribution rests in its archive and Gradert's skill at identifying striking moments in it and teasing out their meanings. The "antislavery memory of revolutionary Puritanism" might be "careless history," Gradert observes, but the "antislavery memory of revolutionary Puritanism was nonetheless influential as a usable past" (10). In Gradert's careful curation and illumination of primary texts, *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination* makes abolitionist Puritanism a usable past for early Americanists.