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Mary Dyer and the "Monster" Story

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Mary Dyer and the "Monster" Story Johan Winsser* In November, 1637, Anne Hutchinson, having been tried before the General Court in Boston, was found guilty of "traducing the ministers," and remanded to the custody of her prosecutors.¹ The Court deferred the sentencing until the following spring in the hope that she would recant. Yet after a winter of confinement at the house of Joseph Welde and repeated visits from harassing ministers, Hutchinson still refused to renounce her assertion that most of the Massachusetts ministers were wrong in preaching a covenant of works over one of grace.² Consequently, in March of 1638, she was tried before an ecclesiastical court, found guilty of heresy, and then sentenced to banishment by John Winthrop for her intractable "antinomianism." Only the pronouncement of excommunication remained and to this occasion the Reverend John Wilson, pastor of Boston's first church, rose to his most vituperative heights, casting her out, delivering her to Satan, accounting her a heathen and publican, and then commanding her to withdraw from the congregation as a leper. Upon the close of this sentence, Anne turned and walked toward the door of the hushed meeting house. One young woman alone arose, took her hand,

and walked out with her. A stranger who had come to observe the proceedings turned to another and asked who it was that so boldly accompanied Mistress Hutchinson. The other answered that "it was the woman who had the Monster."³ The story of Mary Dyer's "monster" is a tale of personal tragedy and public cruelty. A fundamental tenet of Puritanism was that God manifested a bounty of signs, in both the most commonplace of occurrences and in a few "remarkable providences," where by saints and sinners alike could discern his will and be instructed in the life. Johan Winsser, of West Cornwall, Connecticut, is working on a biography of Mary Dyer.

1. David D. Hall has collected the primary documents relating to Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in Hall, ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968). Unless noted otherwise, the basic facts of the Antinomian Controversy presented here are based on Hall.

2. For the debate between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, see William Stoever, "A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven": Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1978) 23-31.

3. Hall 281. The "Monster" Story²¹ of righteousness. Puritans vigorously examined their own lives for the consequences of keeping God's holy ordinances or of straying, and in so doing, poured out a remarkable number of journals, diaries, and autobiographies.

4. For the purpose of public instruction, Puritans often took public what otherwise might have remained private. A precondition for admission to the church covenant was a public confession of faith, accompanied by evidence of one's redemption and sanctification.

5. Unorthodox behavior by a church member could lead to a public examination in church and then require public confession and repentance.

6. What applied to individuals here also applied to the relationship of an entire community with God. Aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, John Winthrop preached that the Massachusetts settlement would be like a "City Upon a Hill," an example held up for all the world to see how these emigrants kept God's covenant and how God, in turn, dealt with them.

7. Each of the early New England histories takes special note of remarkable providences, from William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1647),⁸ to Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence* (1654),⁹ to Increase Mather's *Illustrious Providences* (1684).¹⁰ When several Baymen who had been shipwrecked on Sable Island were happily returned to Boston, Winthrop commented: "It is useful to observe, as we go along, such especial providences of God as were manifested for the good of these plantations."¹¹

4. See Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

5. Edward Johnson gives a contemporary account of the procedure for church admission, including its very public nature. See Edward Johnson, *Johnson's Wonder-working Providence, 1628-1651, Original Narratives of Early New England*, ed. J...

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John Winsser*

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3. Hall 281.





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