

Correspondence

To the Book Review Editor:

Although I appreciate Professor Hermes's favorable comments about my book, *Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell in Law and History Review* 22 (Fall 2004), I fear that some of her criticisms are ill founded since they are based on errors and misunderstandings that she compounds in subsequent paragraphs. Professor Hermes writes that "Crane examines the environment as a 'Puritan' one and relies heavily on studies of Massachusetts to interpret the cultural patterns surrounding the crime. Moreover she uses Cotton Mather's writings as a basis for understanding Puritan ideas of womanhood, forgiveness, and the ritual of execution, and then imputes these ideas to Rhode Islanders. Mather became Boston's most famous preacher, but in 1673 he had not yet produced one of his great sermons. He was ten years old."

My discussion of Puritanism encompasses a world view that Anglo-Americans shared in the seventeenth century whether they lived in Massachusetts, Connecticut, or Rhode Island. A way of life, or more specifically, folk culture, is central to my story, not the fine points of theology. These colonists embraced a common outlook about ghosts, witches, and illustrious providences that crossed colonial borders. Among other values, they shared similar views about parent-child relationships and obligations. I never said, nor did I mean to imply that they shared similar theological viewpoints. Indeed, I take pains to point out differences: the bitterness between Massachusetts and Rhode Island, Rebecca Cornell's adoption of Quaker tenets and her son's resistance to them, her brother's Antinomian tendencies, the Baptist schism, etc.

More puzzling, however, is Professor Hermes's allusion to Cotton Mather. References to Cotton Mather are few: there is one sentence on page 4, a reference to his story about an apparition on page 23, and an illustration of the same on page 25. I make more use of Increase Mather whose sermons in the 1670s and 1680s, I believe, are representative of the general folk culture of the time. The ones I cite or quote have little to do with womanhood, but a great deal to do with superstitions, the invisible world, and the rituals of execution precisely because they are typical of a widespread way of thinking about such matters. Because Professor Hermes has confused the two Mathers in her review, she maintains that the "loose application of the history of ideas allows Crane to label her subjects Puritans," and that "the chronology of ideas and the geography of ideas are forgotten in this study." Since Puritanism hovered over all of New England (and in some ways still does!), I respectfully disagree.

Sincerely,
Elaine Forman Crane

Reply to Elaine Forman Crane

Anyone who appreciates a return to stories in historical inquiry, as do I, can appreciate the work of Professor Crane, whose narrative and analytical skill with the murder of Rebecca Cornell is generally impressive and interesting. In my review, I took issue primarily with the use of the word “Puritan” to describe the Rhode Islanders, including the Quaker Cornell. Professor Crane’s objection that she was describing Puritan folkways and not theology, and thus that my criticisms were unwarranted, raises the very question I tried to address in my brief review: What is a Puritan?

When I see the word “Puritan,” I don’t think “folkway.” I am not sure how the folkways Crane describes would differ from an English folkway. Even if “Puritan” folkways existed, the 1636–37 Diaspora of Bay Colony settlers to Rhode Island for religious and ideological reasons suggests that the difference between these colonists was great. The banishment of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson was a kind of “big bang” in the New England universe.

Puritans frequently approached religion with a legalism and an interest in Hebraism that truly distinguished them from other dissenters. Some New England colonists also practiced what others have referred to as “popular religion,” such as white magic. Like many English people, they believed in specters and in spectral evidence. That some identified as Puritan is certainly the case. Yet a widespread belief in specters, which has persisted even in today’s population, does not a Puritan make.

Puritanism in New England rejected the Quaker experience of the inner light. Puritans and Quakers differed in child rearing beliefs, not just in folkways but in terms of doctrine. In their legal reform, Puritan magistrates were not like the common law Rhode Islanders, and their legal practices were not Puritan “folkways.” The two groups were distinctly at odds procedurally and substantively when it came to dispensing justice. The use of spectral evidence was a juridical matter that had its roots in English ecclesiastical law as well as Scottish canon law.

Professor Crane assumes, erroneously, that I do not know the difference between Increase and Cotton Mather. More important, she argues that her references to Cotton Mather on three pages (see the index) means he was relatively unimportant to her argument. The assumption needs no comment. The argument merits a response. When Crane cites Cotton Mather, it is to retrofit his works to explain what a Puritan people would *believe*. Both Increase and Cotton commented on the use of spectral evidence, but in 1692, long after Cornell was deceased. It would have been better to use evidence of belief prior to 1673. Crane also uses Cotton for views of Puritan womanhood, and again reads these backwards. The number of references does not reflect their underlying importance to her argument—such a claim seems to me disingenuous. Yet if Increase Mather is, as she claims, more significant, one can see that citations to Increase Mather’s works tend to be from his post-1675 works. That the Puritan worldview changed dramatically after King Philip’s war cannot be in doubt, and it took another turn after 1685 with the Dominion of New England. Cotton Mather even began to embrace secretly the

idea that he could speak to angels. No pre-1675 Puritan would have said such a thing.

Chronology is significant, and so is what one means by Puritanism. Historians have struggled with the meaning of the term for too many generations to have the debate reduced by claiming one was just writing about a folkway.

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